

The Puritan Principle and John Brown

I thank God for John Calvin. To be sure, he burned Servetus; but the Puritans, or at least their immediate descendants, hung the witches; George Washington held slaves; and wherever you go up and down history, you find men, not angels. Of course you find imperfect men, but you find great men; men who have marked their own age, and moulded the succeeding; men to whose might of ability, and to whose disinterested suffering for those about them, the succeeding generations owe the larger share of their blessings; men whose lips and lives God has made the channel through which his choicest gifts come to their fellow-beings. John Calvin was one of these, — perhaps the profoundest intellect of his day, certainly one of the largest statesmen of his generation. His was the statesman-like mind that organized Puritanism, that put ideas into the shape of institutions, and in that way organized victory, when, under Loyola, Catholicism, availing itself of the shrewdest and keenest machinery, made its reaction assault upon the new idea of the Protestant religion. If in that struggle, Western Europe came out victorious, we owe it more to the statesmanship of Calvin, than to the large German heart of Luther. We owe to Calvin — at least,

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it is not unfair to claim, nor improbable in the sequence of events to suppose that a large share of those most eminent and excellent characteristics of New England, which have made her what she is, and saved her for the future, came from the brain of John Calvin.

Luther's biography is to be read in books. The plodding patience of the German intellect has gathered up every trait and every trifle, the minutest, of his life, and you may read it spread out in loving admiration on a thousand pages of biography. Calvin's life is written in Scotland and New England, in the triumphs of the people against priestcraft and power. To him, more than to any other man, the Puritans owed republicanism, — the republicanism of the Church. The instinct of his day recognized that clearly, distinguishing this element of Calvinism. You see it in the wit of Charles II, when he said, "Calvinism is a religion unfit for a gentleman." It was unfit for a gentleman of that day, for it was a religion of the people. It recognized — first since the earliest centuries of Christianity — that the heart of God beats through every human heart, and that when you mass up the millions, with their instinctive, fair-play sense of right, and their devotional impulses, you get nearer God's heart than from the second-hand scholarship and conservative tendency of what are called the thoughtful and educated classes. We owe this element, good or bad, to Calvinism.

Then, we owe to it a second element, marking the Puritans most largely, and that is *action*. The Puritan was not a man of speculation. He originated nothing. His principles are to be found broadcast in the centuries behind him. His speculations are all old. You might find them in the lectures of Abelard; you meet with them in the radicalism of Wat Tyler; you find them all over the continent of Europe. The distinction between

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his case and that of other was simply that he practiced what he believed. He believed God. *He actually believed him*, — just as much as if he saw demonstrated before his eyes the truth of the principle. For it is a very easy thing *to say*; the difficulty is *to do*. If you tell a man the absolute truth, that if he will plunge into the ocean, and only keep his eyes fixed on heaven, he will never sink, — you can demonstrate it to him, you can prove it to him by weight and measure, — each man of a thousand will believe you, as they say; and then they will plunge into the water, and nine hundred and ninety-nine will throw up their arms to clasp some straw or neighbor, and sink; the thousandth will keep his hands by this body, believing God, and float, — and he is the Puritan. Every other man wants to get hold of something to stay himself; not on faith in God's eternal principle of natural or religious law, but on his neighbor; he wants to lean on somebody; he wants to catch hold of something. The Puritan puts his hands to his side, and his eyes upon heaven, and floats down the centuries, — faith personified.

These two elements of Puritanism are, it seems to me, those which made New England what she is. You see them everywhere developing into institutions. For instance, if there is anything that makes us, and that made Scotland, it is common schools. We got them from Geneva. Luther said, "A wicked tyrant is better than a wicked war." It was the essence of aristocracy. "Better submit to any evil from above than trust the masses." Calvin no sooner set his foot in Geneva than he organized the people into a constituent element of public affairs. He planted education at the root of the Republic. The Puritans borrowed it in Holland, and brought it to New England, and it is the sheet-anchor that has held us amid the storms and the temptations of

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two hundred years. We have a people that can think, a people that can read; and out of the millions of refuse lumber, God selects one in a generation, and he is enough to save a State. One man that thinks for himself is the salt of a generation poisoned with printing ink or cotton dust.

The Puritans scattered broadcast seeds the seeds of thought. They knew it was an error, in counting up the population, to speak of a million of souls because there was a million of bodies, — as if every man carried a soul! but they knew, trusting the mercy of God, that by educating all, the martyrs and the saints — that do not travel in battalions, that never come to us in regiments, but come alone, now and then one — would be reached and unfolded, and save their own time. Puritanism, therefore, is *action*; it is impersonating ideas; it is distrusting and being willing to shake off what are called institutions. They were above words; they went out into the wilderness outside of forms. The consequence was, that throughout their whole history, there is the most daring confidence in their being substantially right. The consequence is, that when Conservatism comes together to-day, whether in the form of a “Union meeting,” — dead men turning in their graves and pretending to be alive, — whether it be in this form, or any other, its occupation is to explain how, a hundred years ago, it was right, and not to see the reflection of a hundred years ago staring them in the face to-day. Like the sitting figure on our coin, they are looking back; they have no eyes for the future. The souls that God touches have their brows gilded by the dawn of the future. A man present at the glorious martyrdom of the 2d of December, said of the hero-saint who marched out of jail, “He seemed to come, his brow radiant with triumph.” He was high

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enough in the Providence of God, to catch, earlier than the present generation, the dawn of the day that he was to inaugurate.

This is my idea of Puritan principles. Nothing new in them. How are we to vindicate them? Eminent historians and patriots have told us that the pens of the Puritans are their best witnesses. It does not seem to me so. We are their witnesses. If they lived to any purpose, they produced a generation better than themselves. The true man always makes himself to be outdone by his child. The vindication of Puritanism is a New England bound to be better than Puritanism; bound to look back and see its faults, and meet the exigencies of the present day, not with stupid imitation, but with that essential disinterestedness with which they met the exigencies of their time. Take an illustration. When our father stood in London, under the corporation charter of Charles, the question was, "Have we a right to remove to Massachusetts?" The lawyers said, "No." The fathers said, "Yes; we will remove to Massachusetts, and let law find the reason fifty years hence." They knew they had the substantial right. Their motto was not "Law and Order;" it was "God and Justice," — a much better motto. Unless you take law and order in the highest meaning of the words, it is a base motto, — if it means only recognizing the majority. Crime comes to history gilded and crowned, and says, "I am not a crime, I am success." And history, written by a soul girded with parchments and stunned with half-a-dozen languages, says, "Yes, thou are *success*; we accept thee." But the faithful soul below cries out, "Thou art crime! Avaunt!" There is so much in words.

This is the lesson of Puritanism, — how shall we meet it to-day? Every age stereotypes its ideas into forms.

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It is the natural tendency; and when it is done, every age grows old and dies. It is God's beneficent Providence, — death! When ideas have shaped themselves and become fossil and still, God takes off the weight of the dead men from their age, and leaves room for the new bud. It is a blessed institution, — death! But there are men running about who think that those forms which are old and which the experience of the past left them are necessarily right and efficient. They are the conservatives. The men who hold their ears open for the message of the present hour, they are the Puritans.

I know these things seem very trite; they *are* very trite. All truth is trite. The difficulty is not in truth. Truth never stirs up any trouble, — mere speculative truth. Plato taught, — nobody care what he taught; Socrates acted, and they poisoned him. It is when a man throws himself against society, that society is startled to persecute and to think. The Puritan did not stop to think; he recognized God in his soul, and *acted*. If he had acted wrong, our generation would load down his grave with curses. He took the risk; he took the curses of the present, but the blessings of the future swept them away, and God's sunlight rests upon his grave. That is what every brave man does. It is an easy thing to *say*. The old fable is of Sisyphus rolling up a stone, and the moment he gets it up to the mountain-top, it rolls back again. So each generation, with much trouble and great energy and disinterestedness, vindicates for a few of its sons the right to think; and the moment they have vindicated the right, the stone rolls back again, — nobody else must think! The battle must be fought every day, because the body rebels against the soul. It is the insurrection of the soul against the body, — free thought. The gods piled Etna upon the insurgent Titans. It is the emblem of the

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world piling mountains — banks, gold, cotton, parties, Everetts, Cushings, *Couriers*, everything dull and heavy — to keep down thought. And ever again, in each generation, the living soul, like the bursting bud, throws up the incumbent soil and finds its way to the sunshine and to God, and is the oak of the future, leaving out, spreading its branches, and sheltering the race and time that is to come.

I hold in my hand the likeness of a child of seventeen summers, taken from the body of a boy, her husband, who lies buried on the banks of the Shenandoah. He flung himself against a State for an idea, the child of a father who lived for an idea, who said, “I know that slavery is wrong; thou shalt do unto another as thou would have another do to thee,” — and flung himself against the law and order of his time. Nobody can dispute his principles. There are men who dispute his acts. It is exactly what he meant they should do. It is the collision of admitted principles with conduct which is the teaching of ethics; it is the normal school of a generation. Puritanism went up and down England and fulfilled its mission. It revealed despotism. Charles I. and James, in order to rule, were obliged to persecute. Under the guise of what seemed government, they had hidden tyranny. Patriotism tore off the mask, and said to the enlightened conscience and sleeping intellect of England, “Behold, that is despotism!” It was the first lesson; it was the text of the English Revolution. Men still slumbered in submission to law. They tore off the semblance of law; they revealed despotism. John Brown has done the same for us to-day. The slave system has lost its fascination. It has a certain picturesque charm for some. It called itself “chivalry,” and “a State.” One assault has broken the charm, — it is despotism!

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Look how barbarous it is! Take a single instance. A young girl throws herself upon the bosom of a Northern boy who himself had shown mercy, and endeavors to save him from the *Christian* rifles of Virginia. They tear her off, and the pitiless bullet found its way to the brave, young heart. She stands upon the streets of that very town, and dares not avow the motive — glorious, humane instinct — that led her to throw herself on the bosom of the hapless boy! She bows to the despotism of her brutal State, and makes excuses for her humanity! That is the Christian Virginia of 1859. In 1608 an Indian girl flung herself before her father's tomahawk on the bosom of an English gentleman, and the Indian refrained from touching the English traveler whom his daughter's affection protected. Pocahontas lives to-day, the ideal beauty of Virginia, and her proudest names strive to trace their lineage to the brave Indian girl: that was Pagan Virginia, two centuries and a half ago. What has dragged her down from Pocahontas in 1608 to John Brown in 1859, when humanity is disgraceful, and despotism treads it out under its iron heel? Who revealed it?

One brave act of an old Puritan soul, that did not stop to ask what the majority thought, or what forms were, but *acted*. The revelation of despotism is the great lesson which the Puritan of one month ago has taught us. He has flung himself, under the instinct of a great idea, against the institutions beneath which we sit, and he says, practically, to the world, as the Puritan did: "If I am a felon, bury me with curses. I will trust to a future age to judge between you and me. Posterity will summon the State to judgment, and will admit my principle. I can wait." Men say it is anarchy, that this right of the individual to sit in judgment cannot be trusted. It is the lesson of Puritanism. If the individ-

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ual criticizing law cannot be trusted, then Puritanism is a mistake, for the sanctity of individual judgment is the lesson of Massachusetts history in 1620 and '30. We accepted anarchy as the safest. The Puritan said: "Human nature is sinful;" so the earth is accursed since the fall; but I cannot find anything better than this old earth to build on; I must put my corner-stone upon it, cursed as it is; I cannot lay hold of the battlements of heaven. So Puritanism said: "Human nature is sinful, but it is the best basis we have got. We will build upon it, and we will trust the influences of God, the inherent gravitation of the race toward right, that it will end right."

I affirm that this is the lesson of our history, — that the world is fluid; that we are on the ocean; that we cannot get rid of the people, and we do not want to; that the millions are our basis; and that God has set us this task: "If you want good institutions, do not try to bulwark out the ocean of popular thought, educate it. If you want good laws, earn them." Conservatism says: "I can make my own hearthstone safe; I can build a bulwark of gold and bayonets about it high as heaven and deep as hell, and nobody can touch me, and that is enough." Puritanism says: "It is a delusion; it is a refuge of lies; it will not make you safe; the waters of popular instinct will carry it away. If you want your own cradle safe, make the cradle of every other man safe and pure. Educate the people up to the law you want." How? They cannot stop for books. Show them manhood. Show them the brave act. What has John Brown done for us? The world doubted over the horrid word "insurrection," whether the victim had a right to arrest the course of his master, and even at any expense of blood, to vindicate his rights; and Brown said to his neighbors in the old school-house at North Elba, sitting among the

snow, where nothing grows but men, and even wheat freezes: "I can go South, and show the world that he has a right to rise and can rise." He went, girded about by his household, carrying his sons with him. Proof of a life devoted to an idea! Not a single spasmodic act of greatness, coming out with no back-ground, but the flowering of sixty years. The proof of it, that everything around him grouped itself harmoniously, like the planets around the central sun. He went down to Virginia, took possession of a town, and held it. He says: "You thought this was strength; I demonstrate it is weakness. You thought this was a civil society; I show you it is a den of pirates." Then he turned around in his sublimity, with his Puritan devotional heart, and said to the millions, "Learn!" And God lifted a million hearts to his gibbet, as the Roman cross lifted a million hearts to it in that divine sacrifice of two thousand years ago. To-day, more than a statesman could have taught in seventy years, one act of a week has taught these eighteen millions of people. That is the Puritan principle.

What shall it teach us? "Go thou and do likewise." Do it by a resolute life; do it by a fearless rebuke; do it by preaching the sermon of which this act is the text; do it by standing by the great example which God has given us; do it by tearing asunder the veil of respectability which covers brutality calling itself law. We had a "Union meeting" in this city a while ago. For the first time for a quarter of a century, political brutality dared to enter the sacredness of the sick chamber, and visit with ridicule the broken intellect, sheltered from criticism under the cover of sickness. Never, since I knew Boston, has any lip, however excited, dared to open the door which God's hand had closed, making the inmate sacred, as he rested under broken health.

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The four thousand men who sat beneath the speaker are said to have received it in silence. If so, it can only be that they were not surprised at the brutality from such lips. And those who sat at his side, — they judge us by our associates; they criticize us, in general, for the loud word of any comrade. Shall we take the scholar of New England, and drag him down to the level of the brutal Swiss of politics, and judge him indecent because his associates were indecent? I thank God for the opportunity of protesting, in the name of Boston decency, against the brutal language of a man, — thank God, not born on our peninsula, — against the noble and benighted intellect of Gerrit Smith.

On that occasion, too, a noble island was calumniated. The New England scholar, bereft of everything else on which to arraign the great movement in Virginia, takes up a lie about St. Domingo, and hurls it in the face of an ignorant audience, — ignorant, because no man ever thought it worth while to do justice to the negro. Edward Everett would be the last to allow us to take an English version of Bunker Hill, to take an Englishman's account of Hamilton and Washington as they stood beneath the scaffold of André, and read it to an American audience as a faithful description of the scene. But when he wants to malign a race, he digs up from the prejudice of an enemy they had conquered, a forgotten lie, — showing how weak was the cause he espoused when the opposite must be assailed with falsehood, for it could not be assailed with anything else.

I said that they had gone to sleep, and only turned in their graves, — those men in Faneuil Hall. It was not wholly true. The chairman came down from the heart of the Commonwealth, and spoke to Boston safe words in Faneuil Hall, for which he would have been lynched at Richmond, had he uttered them there that evening.

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Thanks to God, I said, as I read it, a hunker cannot live in Massachusetts without being wider awake than he imagines. He must imbibe fanaticism. Insurrection is epidemic in the State: treason is our inheritance. The Puritans planted it in the very structure of the State; and when their children try to curse a martyr, like the prophet of old, half the curse, at least, turns into a blessing. I thank God for that Massachusetts! Let us not blame our neighbors too much. There is something in the very atmosphere that stands above the ashes of the Puritans that prevents the most servile of hearts from holding a meeting which the despots of Virginia can relish. They do not know how to be servile within forty miles of Plymouth. They have not learned the part; with all their wish, they play it awkwardly. It is the old stiff Puritan trying to bend, and they do it with a marvelous lack of grace.

I read encouragement in the very signs, the awkward attempts made to resist the very effort of the glorious martyr of the northern hills of New York. Virginia herself looks into his face, and melts; she has nothing but praises. She tries to scan his traits; they are too manly, and she bows. Her press can only speak of his manhood. One has to get outside the influence of his personal presence before the slaves of Virginia can dig up a forgotten Kansas lie, and hurl it against the picture which Virginian administration has painted. That does not come from Virginia. Northern men volunteer to do the work which Virginia, lifted for a moment by the sight of martyrdom, is unable to accomplish. A Newburyport man comes to Boston, and says that he knows John Brown was at the massacre of Pottawatomie. He was only twenty-five miles off! The Newburyport orator gets within thirty miles of the truth, and that is very near, — for him! But Virginia was unable — mark

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you! — Virginia was unable to criticise. She could only bow. It is the most striking evidence of the majesty of the action.

There is one picture which stands out in bright relief in this event. On that mountain side of the Adirondack, up among the snows, there is a plain cottage — “plain living and high thinking,” as Wordsworth says. Grouped there are a family of girls and boys, the oldest over twenty; sitting supreme, the majestic spirit of a man just entering age, — life, one purpose. Other men breed their sons for ambition, avarice, trade; he breeds his for martyrdom, and they serenely accept their places. Hardly a book under that roof but the Bible. No sound so familiar as prayer. He takes them in his right hand and in his left, and goes down to the land of bondage. Like the old Puritans of two hundred years ago, the muskets are on one side and the pikes upon the other; but the morning prayer goes up from the domestic altar as it rose from the lips of Brewster and carver, and no morsel is ever tasted without that same grace which was made at Plymouth and Salem; and at last he flings himself under the gigantic system which trembles under his single arm.

You measure the strength of a blow by the force of the rebound. Men thought Virginia a Commonwealth; he reveals it a worse than Austrian despotism. Neighbors dare not speak to each other; no man can travel on the highway without a passport; the telegraph wires are sealed, except with a permit; the State shakes beneath the tramp of cannon and armed men. What does she fear? Conscience! The Apostle has come to torment her, and he finds the weakest spot herself. She dares not trust the usual forms of justice. Arraigned in what she calls her court is a wounded man, on a pallet, unable to stand. The civilized world stands aghast. She

says, "It is necessary." Why? "I stand on a volcano. The Titans are heaving beneath the mountains. Thought — the earthquake of conscience — is below me." It is the acknowledgement of defeat. The Roman thought, when he looked upon the cross, that it was the symbol of infamy, — only the vilest felon hung there. One sacred sacrifice, and the cross nestles in our hearts, the emblem of everything holy. Virginia erects her gibbet, repulsive in name and form. One man goes up from it to God, with two hundred thousand broken fetters in his hands, and henceforth it is sacred forever.

I said that, to vindicate Puritanism, the children must be better than the fathers. Lo, this event! Brewster and Carver and Bradford and Winthrop faced a New England winter and defied law for themselves. For us, their children, they planted and sowed. They said, — "Lo! our rights are trodden under foot; our cradles are not safe; our prayers may not ascend to God." They formed a State, and achieved that liberty. John Brown goes a stride beyond them. Under his own roof, he might pray at liberty; his own children wore no fetters. In the catalogue of Saxon heroes and martyrs, the Riddleys and the Latimers, he only saw men dying for themselves; in the brave souls of our own day, he saw men good as their fathers; but he leaped beyond them, and died for a race whose blood he did not share. This child of seventeen years gives her husband for a race into whose eyes she never looked. Braver than Carver or Winthrop, more disinterested than Bradford, broader than Hancock or Washington, pure as the brightest names on our catalogue, nearer God's heart, for, with a divine magnanimity he comprehended all races, — Ridley and Latimer minister before him. He sits in that heaven of which he showed us the open door, with the great men of Saxon blood ministering

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below his feet. And yet they have a right to say, "We created him."

Lord Bacon, as he takes his march down the centuries, may put one hand on the telegraph, and the other on the steam engine, and say, "These are mine, for I taught you to invent." So the Puritans may put one hand on John Brown and say, "You are ours, though you have gone beyond us, for we taught you to believe in God. We taught you to say, God is God, and trample wicked laws under your feet." And now from that Virginia gibbet, he says to us, "The maxim I taught you, practise it! The principle I have manifested to you, apply it. If the crisis becomes sterner, meet it! If the battle is closer, be true to my memory! Men say my act was a failure. I showed what I promised, that the slave ought to resist, and could. Sixteen men I placed under the shelter of English law, and then I taught the millions. Prove that my enterprise was not a failure, by showing a North ready to stand behind it. I am willing, in God's service, to plunge with ready martyrdom into the chasm that opens in the forum, only show yourselves worthy to stand upon my grave!"

It seems to me that this is the lesson of Puritanism, as it is read to us to-day. "Law and order" are only names for the halting ignorance of the last generation. John Brown is the impersonation of God's order and God's law, moulding a better future, and setting it for an example.