

ON THE NATURE OF THE QUEST.
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The substance of an address delivered by the President at the
Inaugural Meeting of The Quest Society,
at Kensington Town Hall, London, W., on Thursday, March 11, 1909.

In the first place I would warn you that my present adventure must be regarded as the excursion of a freelance simply; I am not putting forward a document approved by a council, nor am I the spokesman of any settled opinion. What I have to say is advanced by way of suggestion only, as one mode of envisaging a high ideal, one manner of regarding certain means which have been proposed for winning towards it.

At this our first meeting, it seems most appropriate to consider (though of necessity briefly and in very general terms) the purpose of our association and the objects we propose to pursue. By 'purpose' I mean our hopes and aspirations, the ideal we have in mind; by 'objects' those intermediate ways and means which we propose to use for the attainment of this purpose. The name we have chosen, 'The Quest Society,' is eloquent of our purpose; the means of furthering it are briefly summarized in our two objects, namely:

"1. To promote investigation and comparative study of religion, philosophy and science, on the basis of experience.

"2. To encourage the expression of the idea beautiful forms."

Further, to assure ourselves that we are setting forth on no vain undertaking, we have chosen as our motto the words of comfort uttered by one who had achieved the end of the Quest:

"Seek, and ye shall find."

As to purpose then, let us first consider the name, the distinctive title, 'Quest.' Why have we so styled our endeavor? Many other titles were proposed and considered, some of them excellent names, each in their several ways; but the lot has been cast in favor of The Quest Society, and this has been received with such general favor that we may well be content with the choice. It suggests a wealth of meaning; it is a name into which can be read both depth and dignity.

In its most pedestrian sense 'quest' connotes simply 'seeking' or 'search'; but does it not already, even for the most prosaic, call up before the mind a further sense, does it not evoke an atmosphere of romance, of poetry, of things spiritual? Has it not already, in common use, a different 'feel' from plain and simple 'search.'

A number of the titles suggested favored the term 'research'; but as 'research' by itself was too vague in any case, and for some too ambitious or too cold, had to be qualified. The great difficulty was to find a qualification on which all could agree. Limit of some sort there must be, no matter how we might chafe at limitation. Many epithets were suggested, only to be rejected.

For instance, 'The Mystical Research Society' was favored by some; but 'mystical' requires further definition, even for those who are genuine lovers of mysticism in its best sense, while in modern times the name has so fallen from its high estate that it has become a veritable stumbling-block for most people.

The simple word 'quest,' however, seemed to solve all our difficulties. It could be made to include both all that is best in research and all that is most desirable in mysticism, and a host of other things as well. 'Quest' seems capable of expressing all that the spirit of 'research' suggests—and something more; indeed just that something which I venture to believe is the main purpose of every member of our Society.

With the word 'research' we rightly associate the most painstaking devotion, the most laborious and self-sacrificing study, the most brilliant achievements of the mind of man. But research is unending; there is no finality in it. The goal of the scientist, in the nature of things, can be but a temporary goal; with every fresh discovery there is a momentary, a temporary reward, but that is all; always more and yet more remains to be discovered. The scientist is like a traveler on a mountain path; every new height attained, every new discovery made, discovers in its turn but a higher summit beyond, reveals to the weary though courageous climber only how great, how infinite, is the further distance he has to cover.

Research must be scientific; every stage along the path, every step of that stage, is of utmost importance; from beginning to end of it there must be one complete chain of reasoning, one unbroken line of demonstration; should any link be found missing, any flaw be discovered, any step omitted along the route traversed, the result is invalidated, the end is not attained, and the climb must be begun anew. Even when the temporary goal is achieved, it is but the starting-point for further research. There is no finality this way though many virtues are developed in the searcher.

But—if I may be allowed to declare my own belief freely—in all ages and at all times, there has ever been and ever will be, while man is man, one Quest. That Quest is final and complete; when found it is the beginning and end of all things for man. It pertains to the depths and not to the surfaces of things, to life and not to death, to the eternal and not to the temporal. No matter what route of research traversed, no matter how many steps along the innumerable paths of the ever-becoming, the final rest is in no way affected; for it is something 'more,' something 'greater,' something 'other' than the product or total of any series.

This one Quest is the search or call of the soul for That alone which can completely satisfy the whole man, and make him self-initiative and self-creative. The call of the soul for its complement, its fulfillment, for all that which it seems not to be, may be figured forth by the mind as the longing of the bride for the bridegroom, or the search of the bridegroom for the bride. In folk-tale, myth, and sacred story, it has been set forth in countless modes throughout the ages. It may be found in all the great mystery-myths of the mystic union, the sacred marriage; in folk-tales it may be romantically described as the search of the gallant young prince who sets forth in the true spirit of adventure to find the beautiful princess, perchance asleep in some foreign land. It may be figured by the noble knight who fights bravely through the battles of life, whose one goal is to find the mystic treasure of life immortal and restore it to the purified temple, its own true resting-place. It may be represented by the devout worshipper, ever kneeling at the feet of the Savior, awaiting that supreme moment when all sins shall be washed away, and he shall rise in a new and perfect body to live for ever in the immediate Presence of his Lord. It

is the transmutation of every desire and lust that leads to bondage into the pure love that seeks the liberty of union with the Divine Will alone.

There are many other forms in which this Quest can be represented in folk-tale and legend, in story and myth, in mystic rite and sacred ordinance; but whatever form may be imprinted by the mind of man upon the living idea, or whatever mode maybe impressed upon the substance of his inmost nature, the goal, the end of it is one and the same. It is this: salvation, satisfaction, certitude, completeness, perfection, wholeness; relief and rest from our present state of strain and tension, freedom from the separateness of bondage, the reconciliation of all opposites in the all-embracing immediacy of self-realization.

So while research—investigation and comparative study—is one of our chief interests, the purpose of our Society, I would believe, embraces something far deeper, far more subtle, something more spiritual in the highest and profoundest meaning of the word—a more living, more vital, more immediate quest.

This brings me to the next idea which we should, doubtless, all like to see associated with the activities of our undertaking—that of life, vitality. I sincerely hope it may be found that we are not in search of knowledge only, but that our seeking is also for deeper and intenser life. And here again the name that has been chosen can stand us in good stead, for it can be used very appropriately, as we have seen, to body forth this idea. Our search is not only for Light but also for Life, and above all for the Good; for these three are one in the Fullness of Deity—Mind and Soul and Spirit.

The word ‘research’ generally calls up before the mind the scientist dealing with the mysteries of matter, trying to become master of them, to enslave more and more the latent powers of the material universe, and make them do his bidding. With the word ‘quest’ other ideas are mirrored in the mind; that into which we search ceases to be dead substance to be coerced by the monarch—man; it becomes living, vital. We no longer seek to enslave; we ask to be allowed to cooperate. All around us is life and intelligence to be spoken to, to be requested. The universe of those who are spiritually awakened is the vital intelligent universe of the ancients and sages; it has a soul.

In this vital quest, then, man does not seek to dominate more and more; he hardly even seeks to acquire more and more knowledge for himself. It is rather a quest which transcends his personality—transliminal as well as cisliminal. It is not simply the searching of the mind after knowledge; it is rather the yearning of the soul for more bountiful life. “Ask and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find.” It is not only the mind of man daring to stand up before all the worlds of gods and men, saying: ‘I will know.’ It is over and above this the call of the soul, the gentle voice of the lover to the Loved, the prayer of the devout worshipper to his Lord. It is the way a knowledge and love united; as Thrice-greatest Hermes has it:

“Seek’st thou for God, thou seekest for the Beautiful. One is the Path that leadeth unto It—Devotion joined with Gnosis.”

Man must first seek in order to find; and then at each finding he should call, call to the Beloved to awake. He should refuse to be satisfied with knowledge; he should go still further, and call to the Soul of Nature to array herself in her living robes of glory. For not until then will the true lover be satisfied, not until then will the soul have found its true source and

power—That from which it comes and has departed, and which alone can perfect it, reform it into a wholeness, and so give it the peace which passeth all understanding, that true initiation, or consummation of the spiritual marriage, the *unio mystica*, or union of the within and the without, which illumines the mind, expands and intensifies the consciousness, and partakes of the nature of the deepest and most vital experience of self-realization. This is the Divine bequest that has been willed to us, according to the testimony of the greatest souls among men.

The chief business of the spiritual soul, then, is how to set to work to make itself capable of receiving more and more bountifully of this its true inheritance. Can the objects of The Quest Society serve as means for the furtherance of this great purpose? They seem to me to be admirably suited to be so used.

By the first object we are encouraged to question, to dig deep down within the outer appearances of things for the hidden truth. We would promote research, investigation; we would specially commend the comparative study of religion, philosophy and science in their bearing on the nature of experience. For in such study rightly pursued we see man whose consciousness is normally towards external and changing things, working to attain to a consciousness of things internal and eternal.

By the second object we would encourage man to draw forth from himself that glorious heritage of the soul, the power to create, to express the beauty, truth and harmony that lies within.

Here we have, I believe, the two great complementary courses which must be followed by every individual soul, by every man who is struggling to free himself from the bonds of separateness, in the pursuit of That which is the One Desirable, the true purpose of the quest.

First we have the throwing of the mind outward to things beyond, in order to widen and deepen it and increase its sympathies—the attempt to find the truth and so to unite, in every search, with that Soul of Intelligence which indwells in everything. In this way we enlarge the mind and ever expand further and further our own field of consciousness, our capacity for awareness.

Then comes the calling forth of that complementary power of the soul—the passion of the soul to create, to express that which this extension of consciousness has awakened within its deepest nature.

First we seek and question in order to arouse in ourselves the dormant powers of the mind; we go forth with energy to do battle with the world of objects around. Next we rest, and call forth that God-given power latent in man, the power to mirror forth in beautiful forms that understanding of things which we have attempted to make our own, to possess, to master. For until this power has been aroused unto creativeness, wisdom is not truly ours. Wisdom is the creative power of Deity. We may have knowledge of many different things, we may be learned in many sciences, but true wisdom, I hold, is other; it carries with it, as it were, an innate, immediate and spontaneous response to things without, as they appear to be ‘without’ to normal consciousness. True wisdom is an ever-present initiator; it is not a fixed knowledge of any or many different appearances. Wisdom is a subtle, spiritual, instant power to understand the soul of things, and also to apply this understanding ever to immediate opportunity.

From another point of view the two objects of The Quest Society might be thought of in connection with the practices of concentration and meditation—if we may be permitted to employ these terms without prejudice and in a very extended sense. Or, again, to use one of the most graphic, vital and fundamental of all figures, one that is very familiar to lovers of Indian mystic lore and symbolism,—we might think of these two objects as the out-going and returning breath of the mind; the two are complementary, indeed they must work together simultaneously for the true life of immediate understanding.

This brings me to another living idea, a matter of vital importance, expressed in the first object by the single word ‘experience,’ in connection with the investigation and comparative study of religion, philosophy and science.

There are many ways of considering religion, philosophy and science; they may well be regarded as a trinity in unity, where no one is before or after another, no one greater or less than another; they may also be thought of as each severally containing the others; they may, again, each be looked upon as the means of at-one-ment between the remaining two. For the moment let us regard them in one mode of the last way only.

Religion we might roughly consider as an activity of the soul, science as an activity of the mind; and then philosophy, in its deepest sense, might not inappropriately be regarded as that which alone can unite these two natural partners. Apart these twain are ever barren. Religion divorced from reason tends towards fanaticism and superstition; science, when separated from its lawful partner, the spirit of religion, tends towards skepticism, materialism, and atheism. Philosophy, in its best sense, is that which should unite them—philosophy as not only the love but also that practice of wisdom. Is it too daring to call philosophy an art? In olden days, at any rate, it was indubitably regarded as one, in so far as it was something that had to be lived and practiced.

If we might, then, be allowed to use philosophy in this its deepest meaning, then in its association with religion and science, we might even go so far as to consider it the art of all arts, the craft of uniting, of joining together, of at-oning, these two great orders of human activity, religion and science—the union or marriage of the activities of the soul with the activities of the mind, the joining of the powers and activities of these two eternal partners in a practical form, and through this union the bringing to birth in the man that great consummation the life of spiritual experience of self-realization. And by ‘spiritual experience’ I do not mean abnormal happenings—these may or may not occur—but a life of rest, of poise and balance, of peaceful understanding, an inner recognition of the great truths and great powers which are hidden all around us, and which when brought within the immediate consciousness of a man, lead to his cooperating with them in the divine scheme of life, so that though he apparently still lives in bondage as other men live, he actually is in a state of freedom which other men know not of.

Spiritual ignorance is bondage; it is the root of all bondage with which man is bound. With wisdom comes freedom, and with freedom comes greater power and intenser life. And here we are using ignorance in its deepest sense; not as the opposite of knowledge simply, but as the antithesis of that spiritual science or wisdom which is of the nature of vital Gnosis—to use one of the many names that have been given to the Quest, as the means of reaching the Divine. It is vital rather than material knowledge, spiritual rather than intellectual; and the inquiry into its nature and comparative study of the many attempts throughout the centuries that have been made to realize it, are most potent means to help us in our pursuit of the Quest.

I would now conclude these brief and fragmentary reflections on the objects of The Quest Society by dwelling for a moment on our desire to encourage the expression of the ideal in forms of beauty. Speaking with all hesitation, as a layman and one of the profane, I would venture to express my belief that the highest use and purpose of art is to reveal and express the inner soul of things. Beauty in art seems to consist in clearness of expression, or vividness of reflection, of the ideas and feelings or moods of the soul and of life. Some arts lend themselves more to the expression of the ideas of the soul, others to the expression of the passions of the soul.

Beauty and truth from this point of view are seen to be closely related. The man who speaks clearly what is in his mind is the man of truth. The man of shuffling speech, the man who does not try to reveal or express clearly, but rather tries to conceal, is the man of untruth. If truth in this connection may be said to be the intentional and deliberate revealing of idea or inner motive, then beauty may be considered to be the unconscious or natural revealing of it. Untruth is deliberate concealment; ugliness may not be deliberate concealment, but it is confusion and the lack of capacity to reveal the truth.

The formal mind of man may be able admirably to register and record in words facts, but the artist can create forms which are expressions of vital truths,—that is to say, they are more nearly related to the soul of things; there is in them a life beat or rhythm, a further method by means of which there can be conveyed to the mind of man greater power, intenser life, and increased stimulus to understanding and experiencing. The registration of facts is a record of the appearances of things, the artistic nature is in contact with the heart, the depth, the life of things.

For beauty there must be a certain rhythm and symmetry and harmony; and when this is found, then is born a soul or atmosphere, as it were, which is a new power linking the form to that living idea which the form is trying to express.

This, I take it, is one of the reasons why we are anxious to encourage the expression of the ideal in forms of beauty; and in this connection I have been struck by a quotation from a lecture recently (March 5th) delivered at Cambridge by the well-known painter, Mr. W. Rothenstein.

“We all know,” he said, “the immense stimulus we get from meeting with any profound interpretation of life, when it is expressed in terms of great beauty; we get this excitation forcibly from those writings which are so impregnated with wisdom, understanding of the hearts of men and grandeur of vision that each civilization claims for them a divine origin. Something of this inspiration is found in all true works of art, and this exaltation, this added sense of the value and significance of life, must, I think, form the basis of our appreciation of every form of beauty.”

Art, however, is not greater than science, nor science higher than art; art and science are of equal dignity and value, they are complementary to one another. The scientist tries to stand firm on the bedrock of knowledge; the artist bathes in the waters of life. The beginning and end of science is a fixed point; the goal of the artist is motion. What greater praise can we bestow upon a work of art than to say it is full of life and movement? The scientist tries to hold life and force still, to chain and imprison it; the artist endeavors to make that which is still become instinct with life and motion. The scientist tries to encompass life; the artist strives to infuse life.

Even from this brief reference to a high subject, which many of you are far more competent to treat than myself, I hope it is clear that our second object works together with the first as a potent means for the better realization of the purpose we have in view.

Such, put very briefly, are a few of the ideas that have occurred to me in pondering the objects of The Quest Society. There are many other points of view, and each will naturally regard both purpose and means from his own special standpoint. Indeed the scope of our objects is so wide and far-reaching that the more one thinks over them the more amazed does one become at the vistas of possibility that open up in all directions before the mind's eye. If it were a program of research simply that we had in view, it would be an endless undertaking, a hopeless task; but the spirit of the Quest can transmute every search equally into a means to the same end. There are as many paths home as there are souls to tread them, and as many ways of search as there are types of mind or modes of life.

Of the multiplicity and variety of the means of search I have said nothing; it is too vast a subject to attempt in a general address such as this must be. I have, therefore, in the brief time at my disposal, dwelt rather on the more vital side of such investigation and comparative study, so as to distinguish between what I would call the spirit of the Quest and the forms of research in which that Quest may be pursued.

If the spirit of the Quest is realized every type of mind and every line of research can be utilized for a common end; and it is only by such co-operation, I believe, that results of vital value can be achieved. The ideal is so sublime that no one dreams it can at present be realized in any but a small measure; it is, however, so desirable, it holds forth such high promise, that it is well worth while to put forth every effort to work towards so fair an end with every means in our power. If we can do nothing else, an association with objects and aims such as ours should be able to do much to help in arousing interest in the deeper experiences of the soul, in the freedom of spiritual life, and in the possibility of a truly vital science; and this alone is a noble and beneficial work.

Indeed is there anything better or more legitimate that one man may do for another than to awaken such interest in him? Is there any other help so far-reaching yet so little confining, so devoid of dogmatism and coercion? Where a man's interests are, there in truth does he live; for there is his world of experience, there, and there only, do mind and soul co-operate in one activity. If a man's interest is aroused in the possibilities of a deeper and more actual and intimate life, then the spirit of the Quest becomes alive in him, and he will start on many a self-initiated adventure to reach the goal, to work out his own salvation and self-realization. He is started on the journey home. Such a start is a veritable initiation, the beginning of a new birth, the inbreathing of a new life and spirit.

G. R. S. MEAD.