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# Opposites

by Eugene V. Debs

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Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote what has since been called a "prose masterpiece," entitled "Compensation," in which, among many other things that embellish his essay, he holds that in nature everything has its opposite, as, for instance, heat and cold, male and female, ebb and flow of waters, day and night.<sup>1</sup> Every sweet has its sour; every evil its good. For every grain of wit there is a grain of folly. For everything you have missed, you have gained something else, and for everything you gained you lost something. The writer proceeds in this line, and impresses the reader with the idea that this odd and even arrangement is fixed and immutable, and it requires an effort of the mind to disengage it from the thrall of conviction. Opposites there are, but the question is, are they required, are they inevitable? Must there of necessity be a lie for every truth? A vice for every virtue? A bad man for every good man? And, to explode the whole theory, must there be ten thousand poor men for every rich man? The theory upon which a very large class of men are now operating is, to readjust such things as have confessedly gone wrong in the past. If there can be no good without attending evil, then the demand is to increase the good to the maximum and reduce the evil to the minimum.

Now, the opposite of riches is poverty, and the trouble is not that the rich are rich, but too rich; the few, by methods which have only to be mentioned to excite universal rebuke, have not only made the poor poorer, but have, to an extent hideously monstrous, increased their number. There is a theory abroad in the world that poverty is a removable evil, that it is not a condition willed by the Creator, but that it has been brought about by causes which, though of long duration and deep-seated, may be eradicated, not immediately, but eventually. It is not required that for every elevation there shall be a corre-

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<sup>1</sup> "Compensation," by **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803-1882) first appeared in the volume *Essays* in 1841.

sponding depression. On the contrary, nature would not revolt if the dry land were a table land, a plane. It is not to be supposed that heaven would be displeased if every man in the universe were possessed of so much land, of so much of the treasure of the land, whether mineral or vegetable, as would suffice to make him comfortable and happy, nor is it to be surmised that the infinite ruler would object if poverty should disappear from among men. Admit that injustice is the opposite of justice, that sin is the opposite of righteousness, it does not follow that these opposites are fixed fast in fate, that they exist by virtue of irrevocable decrees. To assert that such is the case is simple madness, and totally destructive of hope, of ambition, and of faith in God. Admitting that the Master said, "For the poor ye have always with you,"<sup>2</sup> but he also said, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses."<sup>3</sup> Possibly Agur, the son of Jakeh, had about the right idea when he prayed, "Remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me."<sup>4</sup> Agur hit upon an idea eminently distinguished for common sense. He did not want to be rich and proud, nor destitute and miserable; he wanted simply his equitable share of needful things, and these obtained he would be neither rich nor poor — he would be independent. This is the modern idea. It is sensible, just, righteous. This is attainable. It is within the reach of human endeavor. There is nothing Utopian, visionary, about it. The task may be herculean, but when the great majority bend all their energies to its accomplishment, success will crown their efforts. There is land enough for all if each is to have so much and no more than he can till. There is food enough for all, if it is righteously distributed, and there is work enough for all, if each is permitted to share in the time required to perform it. Does some one contend that such propositions are hallucinations, because the time will never arrive when there will be no rich men and no poor men? The position is indicative of a misapprehension, since the time may come when all may be rich, in the sense we use the term "rich" — that is, as Agur would put it, neither rich nor poor, but having enough, in which case, rationally

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<sup>2</sup> Slight variation of *Matthew* 26:11, *John* 12:8, and *Mark* 14:7. The rendition in *Matthew* is: "For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always."

<sup>3</sup> From *Matthew*, chapter 23, verse 14: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation."

<sup>4</sup> *Proverbs*, chapter 30, verse 8.

understood, opposites would disappear. Some might have more than others, but since all would have enough no cause of complaint would exist.

If there are those who, to make a case, would fly to the extreme, and discuss misfortunes, the infirm, the lame, the halt, and the blind, we protest that such a course is a tacit admission for all for which we contend, and we dismiss the controversy. We contend that it is within reach of human endeavor to establish justice. This done, the most difficult feature of the problem is solved. We adhere to the oft-repeated declaration, that the great mass of the people are honest, but have been overreached, and made poor by conditions largely artificial, and that these conditions can be changed. Unjust laws can be repealed, and just laws can be enacted. The misfortune of ignorance, the opposite of intelligence, or education, can be removed, that all men can be taught their rights and the proper methods by which to enforce and maintain them, and this intelligence, this education, will regenerate the whole man, intellectually, morally and physically. This done, the man becomes a new being. In his case he has advanced from the mere animal into an intellectual existence, he has overcome the opposites of vice and ignorance. Being able to comprehend justice, he beats down its opposite, injustice. Knowing when a law operates to the detriment of the human family, and what laws will best subserve the welfare of the state, he enthrones the good, and with iconoclastic sway compels its opposite, the bad, to disappear. The opposite of employment is idleness. The fruit of employment is virtue, that of idleness, vice. The question of the times is, Can all have employment? The solution of the problem is found in reducing the hours of labor. Now, suppose there are 5 million working men in the country, and 1 million are idle, the question arises, how can the 1 million idle men obtain employment? We say by reducing the hours of work. We will suppose that the 4 million work ten hours a day, that is, 40 million hours a day. Reduce the hours to eight hours a day, and 5 million men working eight hours a day is 40 million hours.

Tabulated thus:

4 million men, 10 hours a day, equals 40 million hours.

5 million men, 8 hours a day, equals 40 million hours.

In this we see the solution of the problem, and if the opposite of employment is idleness, we thereby destroy idleness, the opposite of

employment, and if idleness is promotive of vice, the opposite of virtue, in so far as idleness is concerned we destroy vice, which is the opposite of virtue. In this matter society, communities, the state and the nation, are vitally concerned, and no more important question is now up for debate. Certain propositions are in the line of common sense and justice, the good of society and the welfare of the state. To devise means for the employment of idle men requires the best thoughts of the wisest statesmen, and when all the resources of mind have been exhausted it will be found that to destroy the opposite of idleness the reduction of the hours of labor is the *ultima thule* of the prudent possibilities of the case. It will be found that the problem is solved without violence and injustice, and upon the basis of absolute equity.

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