THE OPENING OF THE EYES OF JASPER: 
BY WALTER A. DYER

Once upon a time there lived a family of very dull and respectable people. Their lives were so very commonplace that it must have been long ago. I don’t believe anybody lives nowadays whose existence is so drab and uneventful. These people came into the world in a most ordinary and conventional manner. They were merely born. Then they grew up, and worked for a living. They were married, and had children, and by and by took sick and died. And that’s all there was to it. So when little Jasper was born, it was taken as a matter of course. He was fed and clothed according to custom, and he cried and slept after the manner of infants.

But in the spring before Jasper was born, a wee bit of a meadow-lark had been hatched out of an egg in a beautiful aspen grove far away. The sunshine was pouring into the nest when he first opened his eyes, and as he was constantly looking upward for worms that his parents brought, he early became acquainted with the green leaves and the blue sky. And as soon as ever he could, he learned to sing. By and by the time came for him to leave the nest, and he started out to see the world, singing, as he went, of the green leaves and the blue sky.

One day, in the warm summer weather, he alighted on the sill of an open window, and because of the joyousness in his heart, he poured forth a glad and rippling song.

The people inside the house were very busy at the time and did not hear the meadow-lark, but the song fell full on the pink ears of a new-born babe in the room; it was the first sound in this wonderful world that little Jasper heard.

Of course, Jasper did not know this, but the song sank unawares into his tiny soul, and stayed there. So Jasper grew up with a song in his heart, and the song troubled him. It told him that afar off there was a beautiful green aspen grove with blue sky above it, and Jasper longed to find the aspen grove.

Now there was nothing to sing about at Jasper’s home, and when he grew up to be a young man he began to think. Somewhere, he knew, there was a place of beauty, and because the meadow-lark’s song had made a poet of him, he resolved to find it. His brothers, who had not been greeted at birth by a bird’s song, could not understand him. Life seemed a very plain, measured-out affair to them. Why bother one’s head about the unattainable? But Jasper’s song would not let him rest, and finally he left his home and started out in search of the Good, the True and the Beautiful.
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Now all Jasper’s training had taught him that the way to get anywhere was to keep putting one foot before the other. That was the only way he knew of to find the Good, the True and the Beautiful. So on he went up the road and over the hill—left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot—trudging patiently along.

The days went by, and ever before him stretched the brown road. It led through woods and fields and villages, but Jasper did not meet with the Good, the True and the Beautiful. Every time he reached the top of a hill or a bend in the road, he looked eagerly ahead for something bright and unusual, but he was always disappointed. He met men and women, but they were just folks, queer or ordinary, and they could not tell him where to look for the object of his quest. Once he came to a great city, and entered it with joy, but its streets proved to be ugly and dirty and very confusing, and he was glad to come out on the other side. The Good, the True and the Beautiful were not there.

Finally, one gray day, he lost heart altogether, and sat down on a log by the wayside, and buried his head in his hands. And as he sat there, wrapt in woe, there came one singing up the road. The song was like the one that lay slumbering in Jasper’s heart, and, hearing it, he looked up in spite of himself, and saw a burly fellow in a leathern apron.

Seeing Jasper sitting in such a disconsolate attitude, the stranger approached and seated himself on the log at Jasper’s side.

“What is the matter, brother?” he inquired. “Has thy lady played thee false, or hast thou lost thy purse? Those are the two things which make most men miserable.”

“Neither,” said Jasper.

“Tell me,” bade the other. “Let me help you.”

Jasper looked at his big, hairy arms, his leathern apron and his sooty face, and replied: “Thou canst not help me. I have neither horse to be shod nor cart to be mended.”

At this the big fellow laughed a deep-throated laugh.

“And why, pray, may not a blacksmith be a philosopher?” Jasper pondered.

“I never thought of that,” said he.

Then Jasper told the blacksmith of his hunger for the Good, the True and the Beautiful, and the tale of his bootless quest. When he had finished, the blacksmith broke forth into a loud and hearty roar of laughter, slapping his knee with his mighty palm.

“But I see no cause for mirth,” said Jasper, surprised and nettled.

“No,” said the blacksmith; “and there are many other things that thou dost not see. That is because thou art more than half blind.
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Thou art like a man hunting all over the house for the coat that is on his back. Thou sayest that thou hast a song in thy heart. Hast thou looked there for Goodness, Truth and Beauty?

“I understand thee not,” quoth Jasper.

“See,” cried the blacksmith, pointing to a little white flower that grew from the dirt and decaying wood under the log. “Here is a bit of Goodness, Truth and Beauty at thy feet, and thou didst not see it. Thou art blind, I say. Now listen, that thine eyes may be opened. This little flower is pure white and perfect. See how gracefully it stands on its slender stem. See how beautifully alike and yet unlike are its five snowy petals. There is a whole world of the Good, the True and the Beautiful in this little flower. And yet it grows from the common earth beneath the shadow of a rotting log. It typifies the Creation and the Universe. It is part of God’s plan, and is a product of His craftsmanship. I am a skilled workman, and I could not make a thing of beauty like that. And yet thou didst not see it! All about thee are the Good, the True and the Beautiful—in sea and wood and sky, and in the hearts of thyself and thy fellows. The object of thy quest lies not at the end of the road, but on both sides of it and overhead.

“Yonder, at the edge of the village, is my dingy smithy. There I toil all day for my wife and children. But in the wall above my bellows is a little window that frames a square of blue sky, and through the open doorway I can see the green meadows, with the cattle in them, and the purple hills. There I see Goodness, Truth and Beauty. Friends pass the door and shout a greeting, and I look into their hearts and find Goodness, Truth and Beauty there. A spider has spun a web across my window-pane, a perfect wheel of finest silk, and up in the pear tree, just within my sight, the robins have a nest, and busily come and go all day long. Beside my door the daisies bloom, and peep in at me when the wind blows. In all these I see the Good, the True and the Beautiful, because mine eyes are open. I watch them as I blow the fire in my forge, and then when I bend my back again to the anvil, I needs must sing.

“Go thy way, brother, back to the place whence thou camest. I know not who thou art or what thy calling, but I know that the object of thy quest lies at thine own door.”

So saying, he arose and took his departure, singing.

Now Jasper was young, and he did not believe all that the blacksmith had said, but for want of a better thing to do, he picked up his staff, and set out again for home.

And as he went he noticed many little white flowers by the roadside, and each had five snowy petals and stood on a graceful, slender
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stem. He began to look for them, instead of contemplating the brown wheel tracks, and so it came about that he saw many things besides—a flock of blackbirds, wheeling and alighting in a cornfield—a cloud that hung like thistledown over a hilltop—a collie that sat, with ears erect, guarding a flock of sheep—a little stone cottage that lay dozing behind a flaming laburnum—an old peasant couple that sat hand in hand on their doorstep in the gloaming. And by the time he reached the top of the hill overlooking his home town the song in his heart was awake again, and more joyous than ever before, and so many beautiful things thronged in upon his vision that there was not time to contemplate them all. Below him lay the village amid its ivied elms, the white houses glistening in the sun like patches of snow, and the church spire standing, slim and graceful, in their midst. As he entered the village with springing step, a maid, who had been his playmate, ran forth to meet him, and in her eyes he saw a light he had never observed before. And somewhere a meadowlark was singing rapturously of a green aspen grove and the sunshine.

When Jasper reached home, his brothers asked him banteringly, "Didst find the Good, the True and the Beautiful, foolish Jasper?"
And he replied, "I did."

THE story of Jasper is, you will notice, but a new version of the old story in the Fourth Reader (or it may have been the Third) which tells of two lads who went for a walk; one of them saw much to report and the other nothing at all. Which of these lads are you? Are you Jasper going or Jasper coming? It's a question worth considering, as I shall try to show. The human mind has such a tremendous amount of work to do that it is obliged to make use of labor-saving devices. According to the psychologists, it constantly seeks to make its work less arduous by referring as many actions as possible to the memory and the reflex nerve centers. The mind is a general that has time for little save the issuing of orders. That is what they call the brain's ideo-motive force. The child has to devote his entire mind to the complex act of walking; divert his attention and he comes to grief. We experienced grown-ups simply give the word of command and our legs do the rest. "Home," we say, and our legs carry us there, giving our brains a chance to think of the stock market or our clothes or any other elevating topic. If every act of our fingers depended on the complete construction of a mental picture of it and a definite effort of the will, we would scarcely finish dressing before bedtime.

This delegating of our everyday actions to our various members produces what we know as habit, and if you will think of all your
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motions and actions in a single day, you will see that ninety per cent. of them are the result of habit.

Some habits are useful and some are not. I have a habit of smoothing my hair when I talk—a perfectly useless operation. I suppose once my brain told my hand to do it, but now my hand goes ahead and performs this precious function on its own account, and energy is wasted.

But in general, it is plain that habits are absolutely necessary if we are to accomplish anything at all, though General Brain is never relieved of the responsibility of seeing to it that the habits are good.

All of this has been scientifically and thoroughly explained by Professor James and others. What I want to show is a certain specific failing that this habit-making faculty of ours is likely to lead us into; and that is the tendency of our minds to get lazy and let the habits do all the work. In a word, we are prone to get into a groove or rut. Some are born in ruts, some achieve ruts and some are thrust into ruts, but in every case the rut is a soul-deadenning thing, and the sooner we get out of it the better. You can’t see out of a rut, and the Good, the True and the Beautiful never lie at the end of it. Life in a rut is necessarily narrow and uninteresting.

By this I do not mean to praise the butterfly life. Flitting is equally ineffectual. The unsystematic man is an abomination before the Lord. But there is a golden mean.

It is the attitude that counts—the freshness of interest in all things, the youthfulness of the spirit. The Good, the True and the Beautiful are on every hand for him who has his eyes open. Don’t be a mole; that is the text of my sermon.

Now the best way I know of to force oneself to look up out of the rut, and eventually to crawl out, is to train the sense of observation. This is easier for some people than it is for others. John Burroughs says, “Some people seem born with eyes in their heads, and others with buttons or painted marbles.” And it is easier to form the habit of observation in childhood than in maturity, and I believe that this should be one of the first propositions in the study of pedagogics. But to develop this faculty is possible even for the oldest and blindest of us.

Now the ways and means of accomplishing this purpose are manifold. The whole field of art and literature and science lies open to us, and, greatest and best of all, the intimate study of Nature.

Nature study, I find, requires some explanation. The American type of mind looks askance at any theory or pursuit that does not produce practical, tangible results. Hence the student of Nature finds himself obliged to defend his principles. It is not enough for
him to say that he prefers to know a hemlock from a spruce. He must justify himself in terms of the practical. Such justification, however, is not impossible.

A vast deal of twaddle is written about the beauties of Nature, but that’s not the thing. To exclaim over the beauty of a sunset indicates no very deep understanding. We Americans are inclined to look for short cuts. We pride ourselves on our ability to appreciate things that we know little or nothing about.

The true value of Nature study, for old as well as young, lies in the training of the observation, a faculty that civilization is doing its best to destroy in us. It took no effort on the part of the savage to read sermons in stones and books in the running brooks.

We go into the country, and we see trees and fields and hills, and most of us do not entirely miss their message. But for many the columbine and blue gentian bloom unheeded by the wayside, and the yellow warbler sings unheard and unseen in the thicket. Eyes have we but we see not; ears, but we hear not. These avenues of sensuous delight and intellectual satisfaction have become clogged through disuse, and every day we miss something of the wonder and the joy of life.

Nature study is simply one way—perhaps the best way—of training the observation, but the main thing is to get the eyes open somehow. And get your heart open, too. When you were a child the world was more interesting to you—life was richer. Get young again, for except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

I know it isn’t easy. The old habits are strong. Old dogs don’t take to new tricks. You want to make the world more interesting to yourself. You want to live the richer life. But the burdens press down upon you. The environment is all wrong. Circumstances are against you, and the rut is deep. It’s hard, I know, but not half so hard as you think it is. Look up out of the rut and try it. Look for simple things. Life is too short to spend it in a search for the unattainable. Jasper found that out. This is the world we are living in; for this life there is no other. If we shut our eyes to the good things in it, we have only ourselves to blame. Look about you and observe the Good, the True and the Beautiful that are close at hand. Look for them in God’s growing things, in good books, in the hearts of your friends. And when again you bend your back to the anvil, think of the new things you have seen, and perhaps you’ll be singing, after all.

Heaven lies about us in our maturity as well as in our infancy, if we will but open our eyes and look.