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PESSIMISM

A LECTURE
BY



CLARENCE DARROW

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"THE CONSOLATIONS OF PESSIMISM."

By Clarence Darrow.

There are two sorts of pessimism, at least,—one which refers to emotions and the other which refers to intellect. Really, emotions and intellect have very little to do with each other. Whether one is happy, depends largely upon his make-up. Mark Twain put this very well in his remarkable little volume, "What Is Man?" If a man is a pessimist, he is born a pessimist, and emotionally you cannot make him an optimist. And, if he is an optimist, you can tell him nothing to make him a pessimist. You might as well talk about telling an idiot something to make him wise as to tell an optimist something to make him a pessimist. It comes to pretty nearly the same thing. What we think and how we feel are different matters.

I fancy, as the world goes, I am about as happy as anybody. I at least am not much more miserable, which is a safe way of putting it. I never had any complaint to make about myself. The way I do is to compare myself with others who are worse off, which is a good way. I get other consolations in various ways. I do not get very cold in the winter. I keep fairly cool in the summer—and at all other times. I cannot say that I suffer much, except perhaps intellectually, and I have got used to that, so it does not bother me.

I speak of pessimism as an intellectual theory. Is life worth while? Wouldn't it be better—if you could imagine it—for the human race if it had never been born? Is there more pain or more pleasure in life? Those are the question that determine whether one is a pessimist or an optimist. Are there more pleasurable sensations or more painful sensations?

If you had a friend whom you really cared for, not wholly in a selfish way, and he should die, would you bring him back to life if you could? Would you bring him back to life, not because it would make you happier, but because it would be better for him? Many people will do something to make themselves happy and think they are doing something to make some one else happy. These things are more or less mixed, and not easy to separate. But, if you are thinking of a friend you really care for and to whom you wish the best, and who is safely dead and out of it, would you think you would be doing him a favor by bringing him back? I fancy if I really went dead, if anybody would awaken me and tell me to begin living again, I would kill him. And, I can say that and still not wish to die. For the desire to live goes with living. The will to live, at least, goes with living. One cannot live without willing to live. When one is ready to die, of course, the will to live is gone—if one dies in a natural way—just at the time of death. It is an intellectual question: would it be worth while to wake me up for the short time I should be awake and let me go back to clay? That is the problem. It seems to me that, to the intellectual person, there can only be one answer; and all the optimists show us that there is only one answer. All optimists are dope fiends. And, everybody is encouraged to take dope all through life. There has come to be an attitude in the world where the optimist thinks it is a crime if you will not take dope, or if you cannot take it. I repeat there is not an optimist who is not essentially a dope fiend. And, if he is a fairly intelligent optimist—if you can use those two words together,—he takes dope consciously; he wants to take it, just as many of us, when we are enjoying a pleasant dream and on the point of waking, try the best we can to keep on dreaming; we do not want to waken. And, so the less ignorant of the optimists—I pretty nearly said the most intelligent—consciously keep on dreaming. I find no fault with all that. If one can fool himself, all right. I have tried it, but I cannot. Perhaps, when I get older, I will be glad to become an optimist and think that “God’s in his heaven” and “all’s

right with the world". You cannot tell what one is going to do. I trust they will take me away before that time, but, you cannot tell.

The conspiracy to optimism is so general that you cannot speak the language without using dope. They come to you and tell you your friend has "passed on", when they mean he has **passed off**. There is not a shred of intellectual honesty in all of it. We are taught from the time we are children not to see life as life is, but to live and die in an opium dream. Perhaps that is wise. That question I am not discussing. But for us who are more or less intelligent and cannot fool ourselves, the question is still here. And it is only intelligent people who can discuss this question or who can consider it; nobody else will consider it. So, I say again, as I have often said before, as Mark Twain and some other wise men have said, that intelligence is a curse. Intelligence and happiness do not go together. Mark Twain, you remember, makes his hero, Satan, promise to make a good priest happy the rest of his life; and he fulfilled his promise by putting him in a padded cell where he thought he was king of the universe, as many insane people think. Satan said that was the only way he could make him happy forever. So, it is, the only possible way that it can be done. Of course, some are born crazy and others have it thrust upon them.

Now, broadly, you can take just one statement and show that optimism is entirely false—unless you take what the priests do. The priests believe in immortality. I am not saying whether there is, or is not, immortality. All I am saying is that all the investigations of the science of the world have never shown one shred of evidence that there is; while all the analogies of nature seem to show perfectly plain that there is not. But, in order to get out of the universal pessimism of the world, the world has created a heaven. Of course, if you can get into that state of exaltation where you see that life is a serious matter, has more pain than pleasure, and you believe that you can go down into the grave and be mixed with the earth and then come up again and be happy ever after, why you might be an optimist. If you

believe this, then there is room for optimism. It is not a pessimist who says that life is not worth while. All the religious optimists say the same thing—that there is nothing in the world unless there is a heaven, and, I suppose, a hell. Otherwise, there is nothing in life that is worth while.

But, suppose we take life as life is—“an unpleasant interruption of a peaceful nothingness”, as Schopenhauer put it. It is short. The average, we will say, is forty years. I have passed the average. I do not believe I have been treated right. But, assume that is all there is of us. What does forty years amount to in eternity? You could not measure it. Take forty years for a numerator and eternity for a denominator, and where do you get? You might as well have a numerator that is zero. It is not a pin prick in time; and it furnishes no sort of basis for optimism because at best it is nothing. And that must be at least the attitude of every person who assumes the perfectly obvious—that life is only while the organism persists.

Even if we say that we go back into the great well of human life, it does not help the individual. I don't want to get into the common reservoir—see whom I have to mix with! And man—who necessarily is egotistic while he lives, because he can only think of himself, for he thinks through himself—man must have a personal immortality or he has none. That is, after his brain is destroyed, he must remember that he was a man here on earth before he became an angel.

Now, whence came this idea of optimism? I fancy that the brute is neither an optimist nor a pessimist; neither is a blade of grass or a tree an optimist or pessimist. They are just a manifestation of matter and force. They live instinctively and intuitively and that is all there is of them. Whence comes this idea? So far as we can see we cannot find it in the brute creation. Of course the brute draws back at death; but so does the plant. The instinct of life, the will to live, makes it draw back at death. It is a simple reflex action and mechanical. Probably, when we get to the end of it, all human actions, whether they come through the body or through

what we call the mind,—which is a function of the body,—are purely mechanical actions. Man is just as much a machine as an automobile; some of them Packards, but most of them Fords.

Now, for living organisms that think, to contemplate the end of life,—especially the lives of those near and dear to them,—calls forth unpleasant emotions, and a manifest desire to find something else. None of us are free from it. I confess that I have it, although, intellectually, I know the best thing that could happen, would be to have it finished. But, we feel it while we live. It is emotional and mechanical. Death is, by all odds, the most important and overshadowing thing that confronts man. Of course, we do not talk much about it because it is unpleasant. And, perhaps one of the chief reasons why it is so unpleasant is because we do not talk about it. I fancy that the sexton does not think so much about death as the fellow who is always going to church or to dances. The sexton buries the dead every day and does not think much of it. The optimist might once in a while think of “passing on”, but this is the most.

Of all the phenomena of nature that confront man, there is nothing else of any great importance when placed beside death—if death is death. And, from that idea has come a feeling that we can, in some mysterious way, bridge that chasm. Of course this feeling has been helped out by more or less natural influences, like the dreams and visions producing the thought of the reappearance of the dead and all that sort of thing. But, after all, the controlling feeling so far as semi-intelligent people are concerned, is the dread of death. Every religion in the world is based on the idea that death is not death. You do not need to convert a Christian to pessimism. He will say: “If life is so short, what is the use?” And every creed that I know anything about, is based on pessimism, assuming death is death.

We start with the cruder religions held by Billy Sunday and Billy Bryan, and that sort. To them, hell is hell; it is fire and brimstone. And if it is not, there is no use to get scared about it and join the church. And, heaven is heaven—some fun there, if not in this world.

The only reason they drive pleasure out of earth is so that they can have it some other time.

Starting with men like that, men of arrested development, assuming they ever had any, and coming down to the word religions, like Christian Science, and Unitarianism, we find them still based on the idea that we are going to get paid for it, and that death is not the end. The only serious effort ever made by intelligent people in the other direction that I am familiar with, is stoicism,—the denial of pleasure to themselves so they can get used to disappointment and death. But, the Christian is not a stoic. He is only a usurer. He is like the miser who hordes up gold and loans it to somebody at ten per cent interest, so that he can get it later. He gets along without a drink on earth because he is going to have so much in heaven. It is essentially sensual. All you need to do is to postpone pleasure. It is a plain bargain, with the odds a million to one in your favor if you believe, and not losing much, if you do not. But, it has no relation to stoicism. It is a plain matter of barter and sale. There are the wares; you know what you are getting. Now, you may take all the orthodox religions which, so far as the Christian world goes, include most all people, and it is a plain question of bargaining. And, optimism is based entirely upon the idea that the one who foregoes will be happy.

But, there are people who get away from that idea; who cannot take these crude and crass doctrines. Take Christian Science, which is purely a religion of words and means nothing. Why do Christian Scientists believe in it? Because they are afraid to face the facts, that is all.

You may ask whether science is everything. Perhaps not. But, when you approach a question from the intellectual side, you must take facts as facts are ascertained, and it has nothing to do whatever with these superstitions which are based purely upon faith. Assume you go down into the grave and come up again, just as good as new. Science knows nothing about it; and when we reason we can take no account of it. A man or woman who wishes to use his reason, or who must use

it because he has found nothing to chloroform it with, has to take life as it is; he must face facts. And when you face facts, then the question occurs, "Is life worth while?" And I know no one who says it is worth while, if he considers facts.

I cannot too strongly urge that there is no orthodox church that is not built upon the idea that life can be of no value unless there is a future. Strike from the belief of the Christian the idea of immortality, and he would be paralyzed by terror and forget about going to church. Not only is religion full of this, but literature is full of it. We are taught about it in the nursery. All the imbecilic utterances of the world are of that sort. Art is full of it; poetry is filled with it; novels are full of it; every nursery book is full of it. They say, "Look upward, not downward, forward, not backward. Look outward, not inward." Well, why? They might just as well say: "Close your eyes." That is what they do say. Every cheap catch phrase that can be invented by the half-wits of the world has been used to make people optimists; to make them see things; to dream dreams and have visions. All right; I am not complaining of it. Perhaps that is just as well; but, if this won't work on me what am I to do about it? I happened to be born queer. If you ask me whether I believe in this spook or that, I want you to tell me about the spook, then I will tell you whether I believe in it or not. If I had a way of making myself believe something that I did not believe I would probably do it. But, I cannot do it by saying backwards and forwards, "God is love, or love is God", any more than by saying, "dickory, dickory dock". One would mean just the same as the other, and neither would mean anything to me. I take life as life is, and with all of the light that experience and science can throw upon it. I ask myself the question,—Is it worth while?—and there is only one answer to it; if you take it as it is.

This optimistic idea has gone so far that good people think it is evil to be a pessimist! Some sort of a moral obliquity attaches if you don't believe God's in his heaven and all's right with the world. Optimism is,

somehow, mixed up with goodness, and yet the last thing an optimist does is to be good. Why should he be good? God is enough to do the whole job! Really there is no doctrine that I know anything about that has been so persistently intertwined with every idea, with every thought, with every religion, as optimism. Children have been dosed with it as early as they took Mother Winslow's Soothing Syrup. It is the same kind of stuff, a chloroform preparation.

The question between optimism and pessimism is this: Are the painful emotions more than the pleasurable emotions in the brief time that we are awakened out of a perfectly tranquil sleep? Which had you rather do: Sleep an hour or two longer, or get up and go to work in the morning? How many would be willing to knock off their job and go to bed an hour earlier? How may think life is as pleasant as sleep? Well, of course, the optimist, with his words, will say: "You are not achieving anything while you are asleep." Well, I am not while I am awake; and if I was, what of it? Before you can achieve, you must know what you are trying to achieve and what it all means. Alexander, and Caesar, and Jesse James, and a lot of the rest of them, were great achievers. Billy Sunday is quite an achiever. He has probably sent more people to the "bug-house" who were almost ready for it, than any man we have a record of. Well, what of it? When is a man doing best for himself? When he is asleep or when he is achieving? How many optimists have taken chloroform to go to sleep?—to say nothing about it, when they are awake. How many of them take it for the toothache? How many of them take it for all kinds of pain and suffering? How many of them want to get along without an opiate if they are going to have an operation? Even the thought of heaven is not enough for them. They need dope, and need it badly, when the time comes.

What do they talk about? I don't know that I am such a gloomy fellow. Perhaps I am. I never indulge in self-pity, and I think I get on all right. But an optimist does not talk much about grave yards, does he? That is not healthy. Of course, it is unavoidable, but it

is not healthy. He would rather talk about 'God's in his heaven', and "all's right with the world"; God is love, and love is God; that is a great deal better. You cannot go into a company gathered together for a good time and talk about death. You never hear of any social gatherings assembled in a grave yard. They don't hold dances there. They have no saloons there—excepting to take care of the mourners so that they cannot think.

There is a universal conspiracy to close your eyes to all disagreeable things. Suppose we go out to dinner and have a talk about cancers. Isn't a cancer a beautiful thing? It is as wonderful as a rainbow. So it is, but it is not a rainbow. Doesn't the world universally avoid everything that makes them think, not only of what is disagreeable, but of what is utterly inevitable? The whole idea of optimism is a huge bluff, which no sane people entertain for a minute. Why should I avoid grave yards, hospitals, jails and corns and all the disagreeable subjects of life, if I am a real optimist? Why, just exactly as we boys that used to whistle while we went through the grave yard. That is what the optimist does, going through life. And you think it is wicked not to whistle. He goes through life blind-folded. I do not object to his doing it, but I can't go through it that way unless he can tell me how.

I have examined, with considerable patience, many schools of Christianity, even Christian Science, and New Thought, and Spiritualism, to say nothing about the Single Tax and Socialism. And I haven't lost consciousness yet. What am I to do for a delusion? What am I to do for chloroform, especially since the good people have shut up the saloons? I cannot take their dope. It is too silly. And, then the optimist makes me sick anyhow, prating of dreams, repeating phrases that have absolutely no relation to life.

Can we get any good in any other way? What does pessimism do for us? Well, it saves our self-respect, to start with. It prevents my saying a lot of muddling words I don't believe in, and that nobody else can define; terms that mean nothing to a man or to a woman. Did you ever see any of these people who

could give you a definition of God? What is he? What does he look like? The human mind cannot imagine something unless it is in the image of the known. Does he look like a man or a horse or a rainbow? We have had gods in all these shapes. Or, is he love? God is love,—what does that mean? Then, what is love? Why, love is God. There you have it. There is the most intelligent religion in the world, because it has made the most converts, in what seems to be the most intelligent period of the earth,—Christian Science. Look at it: God is love and love is God. Does it mean anything to any one who has a brain? You might as well say: God is pale blue and pale blue is God. If one cares to, or rather, must, look facts in the face, is there anything in any of it that a man can cling to while he is a man? And if not, there are two things; one is to die and the other is to harmonize your life, so far as you can, with the facts, and make the best you can of it; and that is all there is to it.

Now, there is only a small fraction of people who will kill themselves; I don't care whether optimists or pessimists. I think of the two, an optimist is more apt to commit suicide than a pessimist because he expects more, and gets disappointed. There is nothing to make a pessimist suicide, because he knows he is going to die anyhow; he is used to the thought of it,—nothing except serious disease, accompanied with pain.

What has pessimism to offer? Really, it is a more cheerful belief than people ordinarily suppose. Just look at me. I know I am not an optimist. Some people try to tell me, in a kindly way, that my pessimism is just a pose. Very complimentary to a man to tell him he really knows better; that he is talking to hear himself talk. They are good about that. I can see nothing in life to glorify; I can see nothing in life to justify an intelligent, decent being in awakening a piece of senseless clay, and implanting in it feelings, emotions, hopes, and then make it clay again. I can see nothing in life to compensate for all the misery and suffering that is incident to the human race. And, if I were an optimist, life would be still harder. Because if I felt that life to me

and to others was one long dream of joy, then the thought of death would make life harder still. The thought of death to one who believes all life is simply a manifestation of matter, not necessarily painful or pleasurable, but a manifestation of matter like the growing of a tree,—is no where near so hard as the thought of death to the man who is filled with these dreams and illusions.

Now, what can pessimism do for us? Here as everywhere, we must turn back to nature. You people know I not a worshiper of nature. Nature is a horrible task mistress. Not only does she know no good and no evil, but she is devoid of all emotions and has no sort of sympathy. She rides across life in the most brutal and ruthless way. But, you cannot change her. Nature is your boss, and she is mine, and we must learn to make life tolerable, to conform to her as closely as we can. Now, what does nature do? There is a passage which says: God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb. Now, God does no such thing. What God does is this: He tempers the shorn lamb to the wind. It is a good deal easier to temper the shorn lamb than the wind. Along toward fall or winter, its fleece begins to grow, and when it begins to get cold and icy, it gets a pretty good coat of wool, which nature uses to keep him fairly warm in the winter time. Nature starts us out in life with easily digestible food—milk. We have no teeth and cannot eat beef steak. We have no mind because the brain is just a piece of clay, ready for impressions; and that is where the optimist gets in his work, because clay is very plastic when it is young. Nature gradually develops strength until the child can eat beef steak or something like that, and gradually his emotions grow. His ambition comes; he thinks of conquering the world. Of course, he gets a whole lot of hard knocks. As he begins to get older, he has trouble with his teeth, and has to consult a dentist, and tell his friends that he doesn't care so much for meat; he likes bread and coffee and things like that. And, he is not so ambitious. He lives nearer the shore, as you might put it. And, after a while, he gets rid of his teeth, or nature does for him, and then

he gets back to milk again, and his brain was just what it was when he was born, except that it has been through the process. He does not fear death very much. Nature is taking care of him and fitting him for it. Now, that is what nature does with the animal. I fancy the animal never thinks anything about death, excepting an involuntary shudder as he comes up against it when man kills him, or an effort to save his life; but that is mechanical. But, the idea of old age does not enter its head. The dog runs faster when it is young than when it is old, and is more ambitious, that is all. And, man follows the same course. Nature takes care of him,—very poorly, of course,—but she adjusts him in a way to the hardships inevitable to life. And in that time of his life when he is strongest, come certain ambitions and strength to meet them, and they gradually die away, and he goes out. That is all there is of that.

Now, we ought to learn something from nature. Nature prepares all animal life in the summer for the winter that is coming. She prepares the animal with plenty of covering to carry it through the winter. The optimistic cricket sings "Why worry about winter" and dies. Just like the human optimist—although as a rule his optimism does not prevent him from gathering in all the money he can; he might need it over there. Nature tempers us, she tempers the shorn lamb to the wind. To my mind, there can be no question but that the right philosophy of life is to temper ourselves the best we can to the facts of life, if we cannot take dope. We know what is coming; we know that pain is everywhere incidental to life. We know the only inevitable thing is death, and we all ought to have brains enough to know it, even if we shut our eyes and refuse to look at it. The best way is to live on; to conform as near as possible, to temper ourselves to the facts of life, to pain and death.

Now, the optimist is the mose unfortunate of human beings when he awakens. Of course, most of them never awaken. The optimist, if he believes what he preaches, goes singing on his way through the world, excusing and explaining all the sorrow of the world, until he stumbles into a grave that he might have seen

if he had been looking downward instead of upward. The optimist, of course, is silly. You ask him to explain the pain and suffering of the world, and he says: "Oh, well, God is good." Yes. Why did God kill the young child in my neighbor's house? "Oh, well," he says, "God is good and he thought it would be better for the child." That would be no excuse for a man, but is an excuse for God. Why did God put a cancer on a beautiful woman's cheek? "Oh, well, he thought she would be too vain; anyway, God knew." Why does he shake down a city with an earthquake? "Well,—oh, you are using human judgment to judge God." Well, with my human judgment, I judge man, why not God? It is better to judge God than man, because if your premises are right, he has the power to act and man has not. Anyhow, all I have is my human judgment; and that is all you have, and you will not use it. Why does God send an earthquake, or a volcano, or sink a ship at sea; or why consign some to hopeless disease and long suffering until death? Well, I have been defending people in the criminal courts for a long, long time, and making excuses for people, but I wouldn't know how to make any excuses for this; neither would anybody else that had any sense.

There is no judgment with nature. With nature it is just inevitable, and we must conform life to it; that is all. We must live in the summer with the thought of the winter. We cannot sing our way through life like the grasshopper, and forget there is a cold winter coming. The pessimist is not filled with elation; we are not overly happy, and then we are not overly miserable. When we have serious trouble, we don't tell it to everybody, because we have sense enough to know that others have theirs, too, and will not be interested in ours. We know that life is filled with pain and trouble, and that it is incidental to every thing that lives.

The only consolation at the thought of death to one who is not a dope fiend—is that you will lose nothing. If some one were to tell you today, in full health, that you would die before tomorrow night, what consolation would you have?—assuming that you could not take

dope. Of course some of you might say: "Well, I will see Jesus." But, I am not interested in seeing Jesus. Neither are they. People who talk about him don't want to see him. They are willing to have him prepare a mansion for them but they are not willing to move in. The only consolation is, "Well, I will have no further trouble; it will be like going to sleep at night." For many, many years, it has been the best thing I could think of after a day's labor and a day's trouble. It is the pleasantest thought that a sensible man can have; I know, for I have it. Pessimism keeps an even balance in life. If I am happy today, all right. I will not get too elated, because I know I will be unhappy next week; and I will temper it as I go along.

Man, if he is intelligent, takes into account the future and past, and there is nothing sure about luck, as Brete Harte says, except that it will change, whether it is good luck or bad luck. For, after all, pain is a feeling that is contrasted with pleasure, and pleasure, is contrasted with pain, and you must have both, or you have neither.

When the optimist falls, he has farther to fall than the pessimist. It is a long, hard fall. It is a good way from the clouds down to the earth, a long way, and he lives always in the clouds. You have all seen the sorrows of childhood and had them. The sorrows of the child are almost hopeless. The night is entirely black; every star is blotted out, because he lives for the present and he forgets the past and the future he cannot see. The animal is the same. The grown-up child is the same. We reach, with our imagination, forward and backward, and we know that pain, however great today, will not last forever; and we know that the joy, however strong today, cannot last forever; and that thought tempers the joy and it tempers the pain. We know we cannot even take the emotions of men, and say one is good and another bad. Take that one which produces the deepest joy—love—and has perhaps the most permanent effect on the human race, it brings, too, the deepest grief. Nothing brings the pain that love brings. If

it brought no other, it brings the pain of loss, which is deep in proportion as the love is great.

The pessimist takes life as he finds it, without the glamor that false creeds and false teachers and foolish people have thrown about it. He knows he must meet this thing day after day, year after year. He knows that it is not good. He knows that it is not entirely bad. He knows it is life. And he adjusts life to meet those conditions. He does not live in the clouds. He does not live with the thought that he will be happy in another world. He lives it from day to day in the knowledge of what it means, and, as a rule, he is a better man and a kindlier man than the optimist.

If you need friends, don't go to optimists; they are always too busy optimising, and they don't have time for you; but to the pessimists. Schopenhauer says: "You ask me to love my fellow man because of his nobility, his greatness of character. I cannot do it, for I know better. But, if you ask me to love him because of his helplessness, because of his weakness, that are common to him and to me, then I can sympathize with him and I can help him." The optimist says: "Love man because he is inherently noble; he is the work of God and must be noble." According to his theory, everything is the work of God. Love him because he is noble? He is not. He is neither bad nor noble; he is a manifestation of matter. Awakened to consciousness for a moment; gone forever; necessarily filled with limitations; some nobility, and much that is not. The pessimist takes him as he is. He is sorry for him; sorry for him as a member of a ship-wrecked boat on the waves would be sorry for the rest who were floating in the open ocean with him—fellow-sufferers, without reason, or justice, but still fellow-sufferers, with a common, human bond between them.

The pessimist expects nothing. He is prepared for the worst. It is something like getting vaccinated so you will not get the smallpox. If you are well vaccinated with pessimism, nothing much troubles you. You say: "Oh, well, it might be worse." Whenever the

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pessimist is disappointed, he is happy, for it is better than he thought.

Now, it is all a question of taking life as life is. If you have tried all kinds of dope, as most of us have, and none of it will work, and you are bound to look at life as life is, then, look at all of it, and prepare for the worst. It takes away the shock. A man figures on a trip to Europe next summer, and is building on it all winter. When he gets there, it will not be half so nice as if he had come upon it without thinking of it. And, you are figuring on death and bankruptcy and disease and loss of your friends, and you get pretty well used to it before it happens to you, and you hardly know it. It is the most consoling to my mind for an intellectual person. Perhaps that is the only reason why I have taken it.

