

A Land Unpromised and Unearned

P. A. Christensen

The world is so full of a number of things
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings.

Our theme for the meetings, for the lectures, of this Leadership Week, assumes that in our world so full of a number of things there is a special land, a land that has been promised, a land that has been set apart for a special purpose and for a particular people—or should I say, a peculiar people? About such a land I have nothing to say this morning. I want to speak about another land, to me the most precious land in our world so full of a number of things. I am calling it an unpromised land. In a sense this special land is no land at all. Geology knows nothing about it. It has no hemispheric location, no geographic setting. It is without latitude and longitude, altitude and isotherm, valley and mountain range. Yet its boundaries are as wide as the earth, and its wealth is illimitable. But it is wealth with a difference. It is wealth to which the whole earth itself and all its people contribute, and in which men and women everywhere share, or may share, freely without discrimination as to country, race, color or creed.

I say, share freely, for this land unpromised is also a land unearned. It is a land given to all mankind without condition or contingency. It is as unrelated to the material world, the world of things, the world of barter and sale, of advertisements and prices, as it is to the world of altitude and isotherm. For the land unpromised and unearned is a realm of spirit. It is the realm of sen-

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P. A. Christensen, late professor of English at Brigham Young University, was chairman of the English Department for over twenty-five years. He died in 1968.

sory delight—of fragrance, sound, form and color. It is the realm of human associations—of gratitude, loyalty and appreciation, of selflessness, helpfulness and forgiveness, of friendship, love and compassion. It is the realm of human growth and transcendence—of truth discovered and accepted, of beauty created and enjoyed, of goodness deepened and made manifest in life.

None of us are strangers to these realms of spirit. We have sensed the world about us, smelled its fragrance, heard its sounds, glimpsed its forms and colors. We have warmed our souls in the glow of human associations, have had our moments of selflessness and gratitude, love and forgiveness. We have felt an upward reach within us when made suddenly aware of a truth, a beauty, a goodness above and beyond our own attainment. But few of us know these realms as our natural habitat, as the normal residence of our spirits. We are more at home, more at ease, in the world of things, in the world of getting and spending. So when conflicts arise between our spiritual and our material worlds, as they inevitably do, it is usually our spiritual world that suffers, and suffers tragically.

It suffers not by our conscious intent but by a subtle process of materialization within us. We prefer to remain spiritual. Spirituality is with us not only a good word but also a good thing. We eagerly appropriate its values to ourselves and commend them to all the world. But more and more we ascribe its values to the realm of things; we redefine it in terms of the material. Words, ideas, ideals, principles, once applicable only to the world of things, we unconsciously transfer to the realm of spirit. The spiritual thus gradually loses its identity, and, as a distinctive influence, tends to disappear from our lives. Thus the precious values of my land unpromised and unearned move, in our thoughts and feelings, over into the land of sale and barter, of commercials and price tags. And so, in the realms of sensory delight, of human relationships, of mental growth and transcendence, as in the world of automobiles, deep freezes, and stereo equipment, we get, as we say, only what we have earned, only what in some way we have paid for.

This spreading, creeping materialization of the spiritual appears even in the strongholds of educated thought and feeling. A few months ago a distinguished member of the board of regents of a great university was honored as the "1960 man of the year in

education." In addressing the campus groups so honoring him, he said in part, "The primary purpose of schools is education, not social adjustment. Today's youth should learn that *all they get that is worthwhile they get by hard work.*" And not long ago there appeared in the halls of my own institution a poster that read, "Be honest with yourselves. . . . *Nothing worth having is free.*" These were the pronouncements of men, seriously and deeply concerned about the mental and spiritual growth of young men and women.

The poster particularly troubled me, for it bore an imprimatur, an authorization, that I was especially disposed to respect. Impulsively I carried my grief to my students in literature. Did they believe that nothing worth having is free? Of course they did. Didn't I? Hadn't I read the poster in the hall? I had read it, but that didn't preclude questions—or did it? Had they earned Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton—"The Knight's Tale," "Hamlet," "Paradise Lost"? Sure they had. Hadn't they read them? I wondered about it, but, their titles to possession, such as they were, I left unchallenged. The discussion got out of hand. By the end of a wasted period, my neophytes had argued that they had earned the air by breathing it, food, by eating it, stomachs, by housing them—housing them as part of the standard equipment of their ontological being. Or was it equipment they had earned by some pre-existent effort? Regarding the gospel of work, they made no concessions, granted no exceptions—except perhaps the grace of God, and that only with equivocations. For them the principle of *quid pro quo*, something only for something, subsists in the warp and woof of the ethical universe as truly as it does in the standard ideology of business and industry. Just as our material world frowns darkly on those who would get something for nothing, and condemns especially the workman who would bring home an unearned dollar, so the heavens lower disapprovingly on men and women who would enjoy a love unearned, or a forgiveness unmerited.

But the gospel of work so extended is to me wholly untrue. Dare I say, wickedly untrue? It denies the existence of what to me is the most precious of realities—my land unpromised and unearned, my land with all its illimitable wealth, wealth of spirit *given* abundantly to men everywhere, without any cost to them or effort. Why, even my petunias and roses cry out in modest protest against it. Like the lilies of the Scriptures they toil not neither do they spin, yet theirs is a beauty and a fragrance which no labor can produce and no material wealth can buy. As I sit in the quiet

of summer evenings, catching, with the veering breeze, now the light elusive but exquisite scent of the petunias, now the heavier, more opulent sweetness of the roses, I know no sophistication of thought by which I can persuade myself that I have earned the pleasure they bring to me. Nor can all the materialists in the world convince me that such a pleasure is not worth having.

I offer my petunias and roses as a token of the unearned wealth of the world of the senses. How rich that world is, perhaps only the poets know. But they have said that all of us are Aeolian harps on which the breezes of the physical world everywhere play lightly, evoking responses proper to the infinitely varied and beautiful forms of Nature. Unfortunately, as harps, all of us are not equally sensitive and responsive. Few are Wordsworths. But, helped by the few, it is possible for the rest of us to sense much of the loveliness of Nature and to commune silently and deeply with her spirit. Who has ever followed Wordsworth from the celandine and daffodil to the mystic visions of "Tintern Abbey" and "The Prelude," and not in a sense been born again, been caught up and away in spiritual transports quite ineffable?

Thus while the days flew by, and years passed on,
From Nature and her overflowing soul
I had received so much, that all my thoughts
Were steeped in feeling; I was only then
Contented, when with bliss ineffable
I felt the sentiment of Being spread
O'er all that moves and all that seemeth still;
O'er all that leaps and runs, and shouts and sings,
Or beats the gladsome air; o'er all that glides
Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself,
And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not
If high the transport, great the joy I felt
Communing in the soul through earth and heaven
With every form of creature, as it looked
Toward the Uncreated with a countenance
Of adoration, with an eye of love.
One song they sang, and it was audible,
Most audible, then, when the fleshly ear,
O'ercome by humblest prelude of that strain,
Forgot her functions, and slept undisturbed.

But, with or without the help of the poets, most of us have had our own unforgettable hours under the spell of sky and landscape. And in these later years, when fits of nostalgia overcome us, when we long to recapture from the past the experiences most precious in our memories, how frequently we would relive if we could the

moments when Nature seemed to give herself to us in the fulness or her beauty, or wonder, or mystery! Often with me it is the memory of a summer's night on the dry farm at Robin, Idaho, a night when Marsh Valley lay softly breathing, drenched in moonlight and wrapped in silence, a silence which Wordsworth or Milton would call audible, a silence broken, not by the cricket—that unconscionable breaker of silences, in Nature as well as in student themes—but by the sudden, startled, antiphonal barking of farm dogs—Butch conversing with Rover across the wheat fields, and eliciting from far up the side of Old Tom the querulous howl of a coyote. Then the profound silence again, and the flooding moonlight, and the valley softly breathing—and, for at least one farm boy, a moving sense of wonder and mystery, not unmixed with fear. Or it is a glorious moment at Interlaken, when one stands among beds of flowers infinitely varied in kind and gorgeous in variegated colors, and looks across sloping lawns and fields to green foothills that rise abruptly into green mountains, which in turn tower up to barren summits, that separate to disclose in the distance Jungfrau resplendent in everlasting snow.

Or it is a warm mid-day reverie on a fjord in Norway. The boat is silent and at rest on blue waters, waters canopied by bluer skies, and bounded by a giant hedge of cliffs, covered and softened by velvet greenery, rain washed and glistening. There is a restful rhythmic sound of falling waters—streams from mountain tops behind the fjord rim, leaping from the skyline and rolling with foaming zest into quiet waters. There are drowsy thoughts about Beowulf and water trolls, and vagrant thoughts about H. G. Wells and his hero in India: always, Benham said, there must be jungles in the world; man, the Thought of the World, will always need jungles to conquer, jungles to test his manhood. Then there are sleepy ruminations on Matthew Arnold and his *Weltschmerz*,

... this strange disease of modern life
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts . . .

Then fjords again: always there must be fjords in Norway, clear, beautiful, virginal fjords, unconquered by man, untouched by the world of Arnold's lament; quiet places remote from the sick hurry of getting and spending; restful places where men with o'ertaxed heads and palsied hearts can go for healing and restoration, go to see, hear, and feel Nature's benediction—with no doctor bills to follow.

But it is when we turn to the realm of human relations in my land unpromised and unearned that some of us are most offended by the stern gospel of work, the hard doctrine of something only for something. We are offended because the doctrine repudiates a sentiment that warms and gives spiritual meaning to the whole world of human association, a sentiment in the experience of which we feel that we are living life in its finest dimension. I am speaking of gratitude. In the ethic of something only for something, gratitude has, of course, no place, because there everything possessed is something earned, something for which full value has been given. But in genuine gratitude there is always a sense of indebtedness. Our moments of sincere gratitude are moments when we feel with great certainty that we possess some of life's most precious things, and when we also feel with a deep humility that we are quite unworthy of them. To know human beings in living relationships, and to know them through the legacy of their thoughts, their feelings, their works of beauty, is to fill life with such moments.

And every life lived sensitively is filled with such moments. All of us can bear witness. Today when I recall my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, in the family circle of my boyhood, when I remember their interest in me, their solicitude about me, their love for me, their willingness, their eagerness to forgive me, to let me "start over," not once, but again and again, I know with an insight lent by the years that their interest, solicitude, love, and repeated forgiveness were priceless things *given* to me, not earned by me. And when I remember the enduring friendships, the unfailing goodwill, and the cheerful helpfulness of the boys and girls, the young men and women of my school, high school, and college days, when I remember the encouragement, the loyalty, the generous appreciation of my many students and fellow teachers through all the years, I know that their combined goodness to me has been a bountiful gift, in its richness, out of all proportion to any merit I ever possessed.

Gratitude in depth always humbles us. But it also lifts and sustains us. In the presence of the world's unaccountable goodness to us, the world's unaccountable tragedy is somehow softened. The worst seems endurable when all about us stand our friends and loved ones radiating a goodness that asks no questions about our deserts, that refuses to balance our mistakes, our sins, on the cold scales of distributive or retributive justice, but rather offers its healing and redemptive blessings according to our needs. Law,

logic, theology, the doctrine of something only for something, may dictate distributive or retributive justice, but the hearts of good men dictate creative justice, the justice that looks beyond what we are to what, through forgiveness, encouragement, and helpfulness, we may become. It is here that the best in men goes out to meet God. It is here that men are redeemed by the grace of their fellow-men, saved by a human goodness totally unearned.

But the realm of human relations includes more than our relations with the living. It includes also our relations with all who have lived in the past, who have lived and left us an inheritance of their thought, their feeling, their creativity. How can anyone aware of this inheritance speak of it except in terms of indebtedness, in terms of gratitude for a priceless possession never to be earned, but only to be appreciated? It would seem to me that the measure of our humanity is the degree to which we are participating in this human inheritance. We are hardly sharing in it, unless, wherever we are in the perplexing present, we meet the illuminating past; unless, in the voices and actions of the humanity of our time, we hear the echoes and feel the rhythms of things said and done long ago. We do not appreciate and understand the innate goodness of our world, unless in our souls we pay tribute to the thousands of our kind in the past who have had their Gethsemanes, carried their crosses, and taken upon themselves responsibility for the sins, the ignorance, the prejudice, the poverty, the callousness of their world. We have not really inherited our legacy of truth unless we have given the homage of our minds to the countless lovers of knowledge and wisdom—scientists and philosophers—who have toiled inquiringly and devotedly up their Sinais and returned to their followers with tablets inscribed with the finger of truth—which after all is the finger of God. We have not sensed the beauty of our cultural world, the beauty of its music, its painting, its poetry, unless we have come to it with eye, ear, imagination, and mind, sharpened, tuned, sensitized, disciplined, and made wise by the music, art, and poetry of the past.

In mapping roughly the provinces of my land of spirit, my land unpromised and unearned, I mentioned a realm of growth and transcendence, a place where truth is being discovered and accepted, where beauty is being created and appreciated, where goodness is being deepened and given expression in human life. Regarding humanity as a whole, talk about such a province is perhaps more a venture in faith than it is a look at reality. Human progress is tragically slow. The centuries roll wearily by, peopled

by human beings devoted to old convictions and old loyalties, centuries filled with old prejudices, old hatreds, old brutalities, and with old tragedies born of them all. But the venture of faith must be made. We must believe that life is dynamic, creative, that its normal course is a growing and a becoming, that in peoples, in persons, and, indeed, in all things, there is a native impulse toward something beyond what is. And philosophy in part agrees. "Everything," says Paul Tillich, "wants to grow. It wants to increase its power of being. . . . Metaphorically speaking, one could say that the molecule wants to become a crystal, the crystal a cell, the cell a center of cells, the plant an animal, the man God."¹ As the green leaf has its growing edges, so humanity has its areas of creativity, its places where inquiring and imaginative minds are at work invading the unknown and shaping the unformed—scientists discovering new facts, philosophers formulating new systems of thought, artists fashioning new things of beauty, lovers of men rising to new heights of service and devotion, prophets and seers having new visions of God, of His ways and purposes. Most of us do not dwell in these fertile fields, do not participate in the cultivation and the quest, but we do share in the harvest. By the labor of others we do grow and transcend ourselves.

As I write this, I hear voices that have been speaking to me throughout my later years from my land unpromised and unearned, from its area of growth and transcendence—voices that have illuminated dark places in my mind, helped me to reconsider and redefine my ideals and purposes, enabled me to see life—all of life—more steadily and whole. I hear them speaking to me about my work as a teacher, about its unavoidable pains and its unalterable purposes. There is the eloquent, beautiful voice of George Santayana, teacher, artist, philosopher, world citizen. Only the teacher, he is saying, who accepts himself as the depositary of the past, who feels behind him, supporting him in the classroom, the massive tradition of things established—government, economics, morals, religion—can hope to teach with full assurance, recognized authority, and good conscience. But the teacher committed to two worlds—the world of the established order and the world of creativity, of growth and transcendence—can teach only precariously and dangerously. Often the best that is in him he can not, or must not, or dare not teach. And since the best that is in him is something spiritual, to withhold it is often to lose it,

¹From *Love, Power and Justice*, with permission from Oxford University Press, publishers.

and to lose it is to leave his own life and perhaps the lives of his students forever poorer.

And there is an unforgettable voice from India, the voice of Radhakrishnan, philosopher, scholar, statesman, seer. It speaks to me through the word, both written and spoken. No hour of my life is more memorable than one during which I sat at the feet of this great man from the Orient. The true teacher, I hear him saying, helps his students to get along *without him*, helps them to deepen their own insight not to alter their present views. His aim is not disciples dependent on his leadership, his wisdom, but men of deeply informed minds freely choosing their own truth and living in the light of it. Mind is fate, he is saying. "If we believe absurdities, we shall commit atrocities"—a truth that explains the darkest pages in history, and portends dark ones yet to be written. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," says the Bible. Men believed this absurdity, and hundreds of thousands of wretched, innocent old women, in the old and in the new world, died at the stake. White men for centuries have believed absurdities about black men, and black men by the millions have been enslaved or submerged—even in the land of promise, the land of liberty. As nowhere else, absurdities persist and flourish in religion. Much of the good earth of the Western World has been stained with the blood of men who fought one another in the names of Christ and Mohammed, or, most paradoxically, fought one another in the name of Christ as Catholics and Protestants. All of which, Radhakrishnan is saying, is utterly hostile to the spirit of true religion. True religion removes conflicts everywhere. It puts man at peace with himself and with all other men. It gives him inner integrity and outer compassion. There is something wrong with a religion that puts head and heart, mind and emotion, knowledge and faith, at odds with one another. Religion is not doing what religion ought to do if it fails to draw people of all faiths together in mutual respect and sympathy. "My religious sense," Radhakrishnan is saying, "does not allow me to speak a rash or profane word of anything which the souls of other men have held sacred. This attitude of respect for all creeds, this elementary good manners in matters of spirit is bred in the marrow of my bones by the Hindu tradition." Standing in the forest and looking at the trunks of the trees, one is impressed by their separateness, their distinctiveness, but one knows that beneath the surface of the ground their roots mingle and draw nourishment from the same soil; and looking up one sees their tops touching and intertwining in the same sky.

So it is with the religions of the world. They show differences in theology and ritual, but they spring from the same spiritual soil—man's imperative need to come to intelligible terms with his world, his universe. All find their supreme fruition in men of noble character, profound insight, and unbounded compassion.

Certainly out on the growing margins of the race, where humanity is consciously and unconsciously striving to transcend itself, stands Albert Schweitzer, the prophet in the wilderness of Lambaréné. And certainly of all the men who proclaim the failure of our Western World, and offer a philosophy of redemption, no one else has been heard farther or with more respect than this artist, theologian, scholar, doctor, saint. In his vision, our civilization, obsessed with its material aims and ambitions, sterile in its mental powers and spiritual insights, is a vessel with defective steering gear, drifting with accelerated pace toward certain catastrophe. Only a restored faith in the informed and rational mind, and a religion suffused with the love that Jesus taught and exemplified, a love universalized into a Reverence for Life, all life, can avert complete destruction. Every life lived in the midst of life must become cognizant of the life that surrounds it. Even as the wave cannot exist for itself, but is a part of the heaving surface of the sea, so a man may never live his life for itself, but only as part of the total experience of living going on around him. Reverence for Life forces everyone to concern himself with all human destinies, the life destinies, which run their course in his own area of life. Reverence for Life requires every man to give himself as a man to the man who needs him most.

Santayana, Radhakrishnan, Schweitzer, and a thousand others who have spoken to me in life and in literature—only in a pride born of folly, or in an arrogance amounting to sin, could I regard them as something I have earned, something for which I have worked. Truth and modesty see them only for what they are—great, vibrant personalities, standing within the human inheritance, or out on the frontiers of a growing, a transcending human experience, radiating naturally and freely to all the world the goodness, beauty, and truth within them.

From time to time life has a way of summarizing itself, a way of revealing its essence, of saying what really matters in all of its bewilderment. Such a summary or distillation came to me one day and night in Rome. I felt then as I feel today, that my land unpromised and unearned is indeed the ultimate, the enduring reality, that its substance is spirit, that its authentic provinces are

regions of sensory delight, of human associations, of human growth and transcendence. The day had been crowded with human associations. There were walks and talks with Roman ghosts, venerable and benign spirits old in my acquaintance. Boethius of the *Consolations of Philosophy* was there, a noble Roman, awaiting death and writing an immortal book. Pope Gregory of the *Pastoral Care* was there, the devout lover of God, people, and puns. He saw in Angle boys in the Roman slave market pagan angels to whose far away people he must one day send the saving message of Christ. And Marcus Aurelius of the *Meditations* was there, the noblest Roman of them all, to this day the special friend and aider of all who would live in the spirit. Amazing and inspiring paradox! A great pagan emperor sincerely grateful that as a boy he had been taught to work with his hands, profoundly thankful that no one had ever told him that he hadn't time to do the many kind little things that needed to be done. Commander of Rome's military might in the field, sitting in his tent at night, meditating "a polity in which there is the same law for all, a polity administered with regard to equal rights and equal freedom of speech, and the idea of a government which respects most the freedom of the governed"—this hundreds of years before our founding fathers. And Shakespeare of the "Roman plays" was there, there with me beside the Tiber:

I, as Aeneas our great ancestor
Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder
The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber
Did I the tired Caesar.

And, perhaps most unexpectedly, Milton and "Paradise Lost" were there—Pandemonium in Saint Peters!

From the arched roof
Pendent by subtle magic many a row
Of starry lamps and blazing cressets fed
With naptha and asphaltus yielded light
As from the sky.

And Vergil was there, the poet immortal who sang gloriously the founding of Rome, sang of its relentless travail, its bitter pain and tears, its

progeny divine
Of Romans, rising from the Trojan line
In after times to hold the world in awe
And to the land and ocean give the law.

Ghosts of Vergil and the German Lessing stood beside me in the Vatican Museum, where the Laocoön statuary stands alone in awesome and tragic beauty, Vergil to relate the tragic story, and Lessing to expound the sculptor's art. And Michelangelo was everywhere, now beside his "Pieta" in the nave of Saint Peters, now beneath the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, then with his "Moses" who sits with the aura of Sinai in the Basilica of Saint Peter in Chains.

Then night came with its summation and transcendence. The very air was redolent with delight for the senses and the spirit. The Eternal City, the City of the Seven Hills, with all its wealth of beauty—its ruins and its statuary, its parks and its fountains, its temples and its basilicas—bathed in a moonlight as magical as the moonlight that drenched the wheat fields of Marsh Valley in the days of my youth. And music was in the air—Verdi and *Aïda*, in the Caracalla, "Celeste Aïda," and "O terra addio" under the Roman moon and stars. Precious human association was there. Ruth was beside me, Ruth, whose life had shown me daily for more than forty years how sweet, sustaining and inspiring—and totally unearned—a woman and her love can be. It was an experience suffused with a mystical sense of rapport, of perfect oneness with the whole of things beautiful and good. It was a time of resolution and commitment. I knew then what Wordsworth meant when he wrote:

I made no vows, but vows
Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
A dedicated spirit. On I walked
In thankful blessedness, which yet survives.