

III

"Untapped Reservoirs"

That famous doctrine of "man's untapped reservoirs of energy" was first expounded by William James. And now we must expose its serious errors. Though we agree that most people fail to make the most of their energies, through lack of insight and discipline, we cannot accept James's view, as summed up in the following oft-quoted passage from his essay, "The Energies of Men."

"Men the world over possess amounts of resources which only very exceptional individuals push to their extremes of use. But the very same individual, pushing his energies to their extreme, may in a vast number of cases keep the pace up day by day and find no reaction of a bad sort, so long as decent hygienic conditions are observed. His more active rate of energizing does not wreck him; for the organism adapts itself, and as the rate of waste augments, augments correspondingly the rate of repair.

"The normal opener of deeper and deeper levels of energy is the will. The difficulty is to use it, to make the effort which the word volition implies. But if we do make it . . . it will act dynamogenically on us for a month. . . .

“The best practical knowers of the human soul have invented the thing known as methodic ascetic discipline to keep the deeper levels always within reach. Beginning with easy tasks, passing to harder ones, and exercising day by day, it is, I believe, admitted that disciples of asceticism can reach a very high level of freedom and power of will.” *

Here are two fundamental assertions, both inaccurate. First, energies may be tapped at will. Secondly, when you tap them, you can go on using them indefinitely. Nowhere in authentic records is there the slightest support for either idea. I have never yet seen a person who rose to new heights of activity except under conditions which do not fit at all James's hypothesis.

What happens in the case of the successful tappers of energy is quite simple. They give up various activities which have been using much energy and divert the latter to the new ends. In the second place, they learn how to make each unit of energy go furthest. Thus the illusion of tapping deep and unused reservoirs is created. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in those ambitious and intelligent persons of low energy such as James himself or Gamaliel Bradford or Immanuel Kant.

At bottom the procedure of each is the same. All activities which do not serve the

* In “*Memories and Studies*,” pp. 232, 250, 251.

dominant ambition are suspended. The most exhausting naturally go first. They are usually social—evening parties, debates, the working out of important projects with other people not wholly likeminded, and the managing of institutions. The energy thus saved is next nozzled down to a fine, strong stream and directed into channels where a little of it accomplishes much. Most often the preferred course is predominantly intellectual and draws but lightly upon one's powers; remember that the energy in one salted peanut suffices to run a first-class mind for a couple of hours at purely mental work!

If the intellectual ability is lacking, then some exceedingly simple set of attitudes or pseudo-ideas becomes the object of fixation, while the coarse efforts are suspended, as before. Thus with the Yogi, whom James parades as his model. True, the Yogi does succeed wonderfully in a certain kind of relaxation and narrowing of activity—all of which is excellent. But it is absurd to say that he taps new reservoirs of energy. Fact is, he does not burn up nearly so many calories as a common laborer; and a high school teacher, in the course of her day's duties, probably consumes more than fifty cultists who, in best Yogi fashion, look at their noses, breathe slowly, sit motionless by the hour, speak to nobody and keep their minds blank. In all the annals you will find not a single well-authenticated case of such people achiev-

ing anything comparable to the deeds of voluminous energetic men. True, they often deceive themselves into thinking that they are doers. But let their works speak for them.