Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 3, January 2015
Pp. 41-44

Think Healthy, Live Healthy: G.K. Chesterton's 'On Running After One's Hat'

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Abstract

In our day to day life we come across many situations good or bad. Every unfavourable situation whether it's big or trivial, irritates most of us, most of the time. This research paper throws light on our attitude towards petty affairs in our daily routine. We start losing patience and getting irritated even for least significant things. We unnecessarily stress ourselves very often. Instead of doing so if we take these least important things lightly, we can get rid of this irritation and distress. The study points out that instead of grumbling at these petty inconvenient situations, how can we enjoy these moments. It may sound strange but the fact is that it really happens. While encountering routine inconveniences, many people curse the system, the people concerned, the time, and even their own destiny and so on, on the other hand some of us who are fun loving, enjoy these moments. G.K. Chesterton's essay 'On Running After One's Hat' enriched with humour, is the perfect example of it. It helps us in accomplishing this task.

Keywords: Enjoyment, Inconvenience, Irritation, Grumble, Attitude, Fun, Optimistic, Hat, Adventure, Life, Positive attitude, Trivial.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) was one of the brilliant prose writers of the first half of the 20th century. He was a poet, novelist, journalist, and essayist. He was a man of rich and generous sense of humour and positive attitude. It can best be seen in his popular essay 'On Running After One's Hat' (1908). In our daily life we feel very inconvenient for the least important things that are not as per our liking. This attitude irritates us and makes us stressed unnecessarily which affects our health. In this regard Chesterton's On Running After One's Hat' is an attempt to convince his readers to see a positive side of occurrings in bad situations. Through this essay he tries to convey a message to people that it is better to view annoying situations that occur (when not in our control) in our daily life with a little optimism. He gives several examples of annoying situations that people may find themselves involved in. Chesterton was of the opinion that even a very minor incident can provide us pleasure in life if we have a positive attitude. There is an opportunity of fun and enjoyment in everything. Everything depends

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upon our attitude. It is our attitude that makes the things convenient or inconvenient. Chesterton was a man of optimistic attitude so he sought fun even in trivial things. If his beautiful locality is flooded with water, he can enjoy this wonderful scene despite many inconveniences. In his essay 'On Running After One's Hat' he writes:

> I feel an almost savage envy on hearing that London has been flooded in my absence, while I am in the mere country. My own Battersea has been, I understand, particularly favoured as a meeting of the waters. Battersea was already, as I need hardly say, the most beautiful of human localities. ..... The greengrocer who brought cabbages to the corner of the Latchmere Road must have leant upon the oar with the unearthly grace of the gondolier. There is nothing so perfectly poetical as an island; and when a district is flooded it becomes an archipelago. (Chesterton 1)

Chesterton gives many examples of such minor incidents (inconveniences) occurring in our daily life. He states that we often see that grown up people make complaint of waiting for a train at the station where as a child doesn't do so because the scene at the station is a source of wonder and fun for him:

> To him to be inside a railway station is to be inside a cavern of wonder and a palace of poetical pleasures. Because to him the red light and the green light on the signal are like a new sun and a new moon. Because to him when the wooden arm of the signal falls down suddenly, it is as if a great king had thrown down his staff as a signal and started a shrieking tournament of trains. (Chesterton 2)

He was a man of imagination and conviction. His comic view of 'Running after one's hat' is really fabulous. In his view 'running after one's hat' may be treated as a source of enjoyment. If running in games and sports provide us pleasure then running after one's hat may also give the same amount of pleasure. If people can run after a little leather ball, they can also run after a nice silk hat. He mentions:

> There is a current impression that it is unpleasant to have to run after one's hat. Why should it be unpleasant to the well-ordered and pious mind? Not merely because it is running, and running exhausts one. The same people run much faster in games and sports. The same people run much more eagerly after an uninteresting, little leather ball than they will after a nice silk hat. There is an idea that it is humiliating to run after one's hat; and when people say it is humiliating they mean that it is comic. It certainly is comic; but man is a very comic creature, and most of the things he does are comic—eating, for instance. And the most comic things of all are exactly the things that are most worth doing—such as making love. A man running after a hat is not half so ridiculous as a man running after a wife. (Chesterton 3-4)

He believes that a day will come when it will be treated as a sport. On a windy day ladies and gentlemen of the upper class will get together at one place with their professional attendants. The attendants will run after a hat like hunters and provide pleasure to the people who will be looking on. Sharing his experience he writes:

> When last I saw an old gentleman running after his hat in Hyde Park, I told him that a heart so benevolent as his ought to be filled with peace and thanks at the

> thought of how much unaffected pleasure his every gesture and bodily attitude were at that moment giving to the crowd. (Chesterton 4)

Some of us don't find the idea of enjoying inconveniences practical and logical but Chesterton underlines the need of optimistic attitude and comic (or romantic) view of things. He says that nothing in this life is inconvenient if the thinking of a man is practical and logical. If a man is optimistic, he can seek an opportunity of enjoyment in everything, and is a sensible man. Apart from some exceptions, most of the inconveniences are the creations of our own minds. Such a person is more reasonable and practical than a person who irritates and grumbles over the payment of taxes due on his property. He writes:

> The true optimist who sees in such things an opportunity for enjoyment is quite as logical and much more sensible than the ordinary "Indignant Ratepayer" who sees in them an opportunity for grumbling. (Chesterton 2)

To convince people Chesterton has quoted all the inconvenient incidents from our day- to -day life. Practically we see that we start annoying over very minor issues like on getting our doors, gates, drawers and cupboards jammed, and even if we are not able to open a tight vial. Discussing about some of his known who could not pull out their jammed and tight drawers, he gives an example of his friend who was also in distress because of the same reason. The writer states:

> A friend of mine was particularly afflicted in this way. Every day his drawer was jammed, and every day in consequence it was something else that rhymes to it. But I pointed out to him that this sense of wrong was really subjective and relative; it rested entirely upon the assumption that the drawer could, should, and would come out easily. "But if," I said, "you picture to yourself that you are pulling against some powerful and oppressive enemy, the struggle will become merely exciting and not exasperating. Imagine that you are tugging up a lifeboat out of the sea. Imagine that you are roping up a fellow-creature out of an Alpine crevasse. Imagine even that you are a boy again and engaged in a tug-of-war between French and English." (Chesterton 5)

He is of the opinion that when you have no choice and no control over the happenings, it's better to handle them light heartedly and with optimistic and comic vision. He is sure enough that his words have positive impact upon people as is the case of his friend mentioned in the above passage. He writes about his friend:

> Shortly after saying this I left him; but I have no doubt at all that my words bore the best possible fruit. I have no doubt that every day of his life he hangs on to the handle of that drawer with a flushed face and eyes bright with battle, uttering encouraging shouts to himself, and seeming to hear all round him the roar of an applauding ring. (Chesterton 6)

Through the essay Chesterton emphasizes emotional deal of people. According to him everything depends upon the emotional point of view. He asserts that reality test can be conducted to almost every one of the things presently talked of as the typical nuisance of daily life. These are not only the inconveniences or worries which can provide us an opportunity for enjoyment if handled with sportive spirit rather other trivial worries can also be enjoyed if taken with the same spirit. In the essay he writes:

> The same principle can be applied to every other typical domestic worry. A gentleman trying to get a fly out of the milk or a piece of cork out of his glass of wine often imagines himself to be irritated. Let him think for a moment of the patience of anglers sitting by dark pools, and let his soul be immediately irradiated with gratification and repose. (Chesterton 4-5)

Chesterton believes that convenience or inconvenience is just an attitudinal matter. Nothing is convenient or inconvenient in itself. It is just our perception that makes the things so. We often face many small incidents and problems in our daily life which cause discomfort to us but if we rightly consider them, they can certainly provide us pleasure. He firmly believes that if our attitude to incidents is comical, we'll definitely get pleasure from every adverse situation. If our beautiful locality is flooded with water, it of course causes many problems to us. But if we take the situation in the right sprit, it doesn't annoy us at all. He writes in the essay: "An adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered." (Chesterton 6)

Some of us may likely consider his idea of enjoying a flooded locality insensitive and impractical because a situation of this magnitude may throw lives of civilians out of gear. Human and animal lives may be lost, houses may be devastated, electricity and water supply may get disrupted, and crops may get ruined and so on. In that case it is most likely to cause panic and irritation. But still he opines: "Some consider such romantic view of flood or fire slightly lacking in reality. But really this romantic view of such inconveniences is quite as practical as the other." (Chesterton 1) He agrees that a flood, in fact is a calamity because it causes pain, discomfort and inconvenience. But once one's locality is flooded, one has no option but to take a romantic view of things. When his locality was flooded, he viewed it like a watery landscape. For him it presented a view of Venice. When flooded it looked like an island where he could sail in a gondola like a Venetian. When London was flooded in his absence, he felt envious for he missed the opportunity of enjoying the scene of flooded London.

Chesterton, through his comic essay 'On Running After One's Hat' tries to convince the people the significance of optimistic, positive, and comic attitude. He finds an opportunity of enjoyment even in small activity like 'running after one's hat'. He finds it a comic exercise. He states that most of the activities of man are also comic. Just as eating, love making, and running after one's wife. Running after one's hat is not as ridiculous as running after one's wife. Chesterton draws moral lessons from minor events like running after one's hat. The same lessons he wishes and tries to convey to his readers. Through this essay he strongly sends the lesson or message that if an inconvenience is rightly considered, it becomes a source of enjoyment. The question of pleasure or pain, convenience or inconvenience is attitudinal. A small inconvenience may be pleasure some if it is taken as an opportunity of amusement. So 'think healthy and live healthy'.

Work Cited

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