

Discovery of Truth
(Lavinia Goodell's Graduating Essay at Brooklyn Heights Seminary, 1858)

It is a queer place this world we find ourselves in when we first open the eyes of our minds, and look about us. It is a vast unexplored field, everything a phenomenon to be studied, investigated, solved. Our first impulse is to investigate, to solve.

Nature and soul just fit into each other, the one being an answer to the other. The soul craves work and Nature answers---Here! Solve my mysteries.

The soul aspires after truth, and nature furnishes an unbounded field of investigation.

Truth is objective, but the implements with which we are to find it are within ourselves. There are certain endowments inseparable from our nature with which we investigate—we seek truth. The child does not stop to reason, and prove mathematically that “every effect must have a cause” He assumes that as an axiom. Every baby picking to pieces his little toy watch or wagon, or performing chemical experiments with his mouth for a laboratory, is an inductive philosopher.

All children are Bacons.—as we explore deeper into the labyrinths of nature, we strive to simplify or combine under a few heads the various phenomena. We trace nature back to its source like a child in the dark feeling instinctively after its father.

The human soul feels backward through all the wilderness of nature after God.

It were as if God, like a proud parent, stood his child off a little way just to see it walk back to him.

The study of nature is the earliest study of the mind. It is the first that opens its stores to the child. Its phenomena are outward, tangible to the senses, and hence better adapted to its capacities. True the great underlying principle can be discovered only by the closest most unwearied study of the greatest minds—life studies—and the study of many lives, but the commencement of the first impulse, the great questions, which manhood answers, are asked by childhood. In childhood there is a vague general idea that every thing commenced with us. We are the center around which all revolves.

Contact with other similar centers, however, soon disabuses us of this idea. We learn that this strange world went on, exhibiting various phases, long previous to our advent. There are presented to our study, as varied and as strange phenomena as any in nature—the phenomena of men actions. We seek their hidden causes, seek through these actions the nature of man.

We find others too, who like ourselves have been seeking after truth. So we open our hearts to them, admit them into the brotherhood. They have unlocked mysteries which we might spend a lifetime, and not fathom. And they have wondered and studied over the mystery of man; they have written, have propounded theories, constructed from their different standpoints These too are presented for our investigation.

And from this double study, the study of nature and of the part of God and of humanity, we turn our eyes within; ourselves our ownelves are our greatest deepest study. Each is but one of that great humanity and this same self study has been prosecuted long before us. What are we? What is our destiny? We study our own impulses and passions, the principles and ideas which are within us.

We find a touchstone in our souls by which to test things, to tell right from wrong, good from evil. And this touchstone is examined, tested by us, in our self examination. Here, many fail, are entangled and puzzled in the mysterious depths of the soul. This test they take up, and question, doubt and analyze.

Perhaps it is the result of education, perhaps it is the modification of some other idea, perhaps it is only a refined selfishness and so they find by distrusting themselves, their own natures.

But what is the meaning of all these varied phenomena around us? What's the meaning of ourselves? How shall we find out the truth?

Dis-cover means to un-cover. We must uncover hidden truth. Truth now exists. It is eternal. We have only to seek to discover it. The laws which govern the material world held sway long before they were discovered by man. The earth revolved around the sun, though man long insisted on the contrary theory.

So, in the moral world. Truth is an absolute. We can search for but not create it.

In investigating the truths of nature, and of History the outward tangible workings, we ascertain facts, and through these trace their causes. The tendencies implanted in human nature need only to be applied to outward phenomena in order to find out the truth. This study in time, brings us deeper into another, revolves around the greater, the higher study of ourselves. Here, each must study, investigate, determine for himself.

There is no system of division of labor in the moral world, but which one person or class shall do up all the logic for the masses, construct a system of philosophy to which others must assent implicitly; one huge reason of sufficient power to serve the whole peoples.

Each must be his own philosopher. Each individual has a complete set of instruments—so to speak, by which to seek truth, and God means him to use them. It is a discipline intended for us.

Others may represent truths to us, which we have never discovered, and to which our reason yields assent, but the test within must decide.

In childhood our ideas of truth receive their moulding from surrounding influences. In our minds, the particular shade of belief which we are in the habit of hearing assured as truth, seems to us as really true as any of the fixed facts in nature.

Clouds are near neighbors to the stars, in the uneducated eye. But when we look abroad, upon the world, and find widely different and conflicting views we are unsettled, we are puzzled, we hesitate. People seem to be looking at things from such different standpoints. Each one insists that he sees the truth—the whole truth. This has led some moral philosophers to the notion that, there is no real absolute truth, separate from the individual mind. Well say they “Such a thing is truth to one, the opposite to another. Your belief is truth to you, mine to me.,” leaving the impression that there is not much of any truth; not absolute eternal truth.

Their argument being about as logical as it would be in an astronomer to say Jupiter as viewed from our planet, would appear in one part of the heavens, from another in the opposite, and, so really Jupiter is nowhere in particular.

There is absolute, eternal truth, whether we recognize and receive it as such or not.

And here we are, looking out on the broad ocean before us, with the natural, longing, thirsting desire to know the truth. How shall we find it?

The test within us is our first, our highest authority.

But we are not our natural selves. The test is not pure as when implanted in us by the hands of God. There is in us alas a principle of evil. It is a strange paradox in human nature, this tendency at once to good and evil. Philosophers may differ as to whence the evil originated, but the fact remains. And we must investigate closely the depths of our own hearts, and become assured that we try by the true test of rights, that it is not alloyed by any baser metal. We have received a certain bias, too, from education and surroundings.

But the astronomer does not assign a star to the particular points in the heavens, in which it appears to him from his point of observation. He is obliged to make certain allowances for “parallax refraction,” etc. before he can determine its true position.

The rule of the physical world holds true also in the moral. In investigating truth, various influences must be calculated, and allowances made. We must stand outside one educational position, throw ourselves before pure nature. There is the peculiar shading of the individual mind. The great destructive features of human nature are the same in all, but each individual has a distinctive character of mind, seeing things through a lens of his own. And as the refraction of the atmosphere surrounding our planet influences the apparent position of different stars, so the peculiar individual atmosphere refracts so to speak, the appearance of truth to the mind.

The peculiar spirit of the times, the individual atmosphere of the age, must be studied, its influences weighed. We might view the same thing in a totally different light in different ages of the world. An idea which from its universality we might class as fundamental in human nature, may be only a peculiar form of thought of one age, or nation.

Mind is developed in widely different directions under different classes of influences. Here also must be noticed the great law of reaction, which holds sway in the moral as well as the physical world, the mighty surges of thought which sweep over our intellect.

As in order to see all the members of the solar systems uniformly and harmoniously moving ___ each exactly in its true position, the spectator must view them from the sun—the center—so to view things truly in the intellectual system we must take our observation from God's standpoint. He is the great center. But how to find out the standpoint! This is the great work, the materials are before us. The test within. If we are true to our own higher nature, we cannot fail.