

The Shaking of the Foundations

by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include *Systematic Theology*; *The Courage to Be*; *Dynamics of Faith*; *Love, Power and Justice*; *Morality and Beyond*; and *Theology of Culture*. This book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955 and is out of print. This material was prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell.

Chapter 7: The Depth of Existence

But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: For the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things God.

I CORINTHIANS 2:10.

Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord.

PSALM 130:1.

From the words of Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, let us concentrate on one verse: "*The Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God*". And from this verse, let us make one word the word "deep" the subject of our meditation. And from the 130th Psalm let us concentrate on that one verse: "Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord."; and let us make one word the word "depth" also the subject of our meditation.

The words "deep" and "depth" are used in our daily life, in poetry and philosophy, in the Bible, and in many other religious documents, to indicate a spiritual attitude, although the words themselves are taken from a spatial experience. Depth is a dimension of space; yet at the same time it is a symbol for a spiritual quality. Most of our religious symbols have this character, reminding us of our finitude and our bondage to things that are visible. We are and we remain sensuous beings even when we deal with spiritual things. There is, on the other hand, a great wisdom in our language. It is the embodiment of innumerable experiences of the past. It is not by chance alone that we use certain visible symbols and do not use others. Therefore, it is often useful to find the reasons for the choices of the collective mind of former generations. It may become of ultimate significance to us, when we see what is implied in the use of terms like "deep", "depth", and "profound", for the expression of our spiritual life. It may give us the impulse to strive for our own depth.

"Deep" in its spiritual use has two meanings: it means either the opposite of "shallow", or the opposite of "high". Truth is deep and not shallow; suffering is depth and not height. Both the light of truth and the darkness of suffering are deep. There is a depth in God, and there is a depth out of which the psalmist cries to God. Why is truth deep? And why is suffering deep? And why is the same spatial symbol used for both experiences? These questions shall guide our meditation. All visible things have a surface. Surface is that side of things which first appears to us. If we look at it, we know what things seem to be. Yet if we act according to what things and persons seem to be, we are disappointed. Our expectations are frustrated. And so we try to penetrate below the surfaces in order to learn what things really are. Why have men always asked for truth? Is it because they have been disappointed with the surfaces, and have known that the truth which does not disappoint dwells below the surfaces in the depth? And therefore, men have dug through one level after another. What seemed true one day was experienced as superficial the next. When we

encounter a person, we receive an impression. But often if we act accordingly we are disappointed by his actual behavior. We pierce a deeper level of his character, and for some time experience less disappointment. But soon he may do something which is contrary to all our expectations; and we realize that what we know about him is still superficial. Again we dig more deeply into his true being.

Science has been carried on in this way. Science questions the common assumptions which seem to be true to everyone, to the layman as well as to the average scholar. Then the genius comes and asks for the basis of these accepted assumptions; when they are proved not to be true, an earthquake in science occurs out of the depth. Such earthquakes occurred when Copernicus asked if our sense-impressions could be the ground of astronomy, and when Einstein questioned whether there is an absolute point from which the observer could look at the motions of things. An earthquake occurred when Marx questioned the existence of an intellectual and moral history independent of its economic and social basis. It occurred in the most eruptive way when the first philosophers questioned what everybody had taken for granted from times immemorial -- being itself. When they became conscious of the astonishing fact, underlying all facts, that there is something and not nothing, an unsurpassable depth of thought was reached.

In the light of these great and daring steps toward the deep things of our world, we should look at ourselves and at the opinions we take for granted. And we should see what there is in these things of prejudice, derived from our individual preferences and social surroundings. We should be shocked to notice how little of our spiritual world is deeper than the surface, how little would be able to withstand a serious blow. Some-thing terribly tragic happens in all periods of man's spiritual life: Truths, once deep and powerful, discovered by the greatest geniuses through profound suffering and incredible labor, become shallow and superficial when used in daily discussion. How can and how does this tragedy occur? It can and does unavoidably occur, because there can be no depth without the way to the depth. Truth without the way to truth is dead; if it still be used, it contributes only to the surface of things. Look at the student who knows the content of the hundred most important books of world history, and yet whose spiritual life remains as shallow as it ever was, or perhaps becomes even more superficial. And then look at an uneducated worker who performs a mechanical task day by day, but who suddenly asks himself:?

What does it mean, that I do this work?

What does it mean for my life? What is the meaning of my life? Because he asks these questions, that man is on the way into depth, whereas the other man, the student of history, dwells on the surface among petrified bodies, brought out of the depth by some spiritual earthquake of the past. The simple worker may grasp truth, even though he cannot answer his questions; the learned scholar may possess no truth, even though he knows all the truths of the past..

The depth of thought is a part of the depth of life. Most of our life continues on the surface. We are enslaved by the routine of our daily lives, in work and pleasure, in business and recreation. We are conquered by innumerable hazards, both good and evil. We are more driven than driving. We do not stop to look at the height above us, or to the depth below us. We are always moving forward, although usually in a circle, which finally brings us back to the place from which we first moved. We are in constant motion and never stop to plunge into the depth. We talk and talk and never listen to the voices speaking to our depth and from our depth. We accept ourselves as we appear to ourselves, and do not care what we really are. Like hit-and-run drivers, we injure our souls by the speed with which we move on the surface; and then we rush away, leaving our bleeding souls alone. We miss, therefore, our depth and our true life. And it is only when the picture that we have of ourselves breaks down completely, only when we find ourselves acting against all the expectations we had derived from that picture, and only when an earthquake shakes and

disrupts the surface of our self-knowledge, that we are willing to look into a deeper level of our being.

The wisdom of all ages and of all continents speaks about the road to our depth. It has been described in innumerable different ways. But all those who have been concerned mystics and priests, poets and philosophers, simple people and educated people with that road through confession, lonely self-scrutiny, internal or external catastrophes, prayer, contemplation, have witnessed to the same experience. They have found that they were not what they believed themselves to be, even after a deeper level had appeared to them below the vanishing surface. That deeper level itself became surface, when a still deeper level was discovered, this happening again and again, as long as their very lives, as long as they kept on the road to their depth.

Today a new form of this method has become famous, the so-called "psychology of depth". It leads us from the surface of our self-knowledge into levels where things are recorded which we knew nothing about on the surface of our consciousness. It shows us traits of character which contradict everything that we believed we knew about ourselves. It can help us to find the way into our depth, although it cannot help us in an ultimate way, because it cannot guide us to the deepest ground of our being and of all being, the depth of life itself. The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God.

That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not. He who knows about depth knows about God.

We have considered the depth of the world and the depth of our souls. But we are only in a world through a community of men. And we can discover our souls only through the mirror of those who look at us. There is no depth of life without the depth of the common life. We usually live in history as much on the surface as we live our individual lives. We understand our historical existence as it appears to us, and not as it really is. The stream of daily news, the waves of daily propaganda, and the tides of conventions and sensationalism keep our minds occupied. The noise of these shallow waters prevents us from listening to the sounds out of the depth, to the sounds of what really happens in the ground of our social structure, in the longing hearts of the masses, and in the struggling minds of those who are sensitive to historical changes.

Our ears are as deaf to the cries out of the social depth as they are to the cries out of the depth of our souls. We leave the bleeding victims of our social system as alone, after we have hurt them without hearing their cries in the noise of our daily lives, as we do our own bleeding souls. We believed once that we were living in a period of unavoidable progress to a better humanity. But in the depth of our social structure the forces of destruction had already gathered strength. It once seemed as if human reason had conquered nature and history. But this was surface only; and in the depth of our community the rebellion against the surface had already begun. We produced ever better and ever more perfect tools and means for the life of mankind. But in the depth they had already turned into means and tools for man's self-destruction.

Decades ago prophetic minds looked into the depth. Painters expressed their feeling of the coming catastrophe by disrupting the surface of man and of nature in their pictures. Poets used strange, offensive words and rhythms in order to throw light upon the contrast

between what seemed to be and what really was. Beside the psychology of depth, a sociology of depth arose. But it is only now, in the decade in which the most horrible social earthquake of all times has grasped the whole of mankind, that the eyes of the nations have been opened to the depth which they provoke by their daring to uncover the depths of social judgment and social hope. And who can really bear the ultimate depth, the burning fire in the ground of all being, without saying with the prophet, "Woe unto me! For I am undone. For mine eyes have seen the Lord of Hosts!"

Our attempt to avoid the road which leads to such a depth of suffering and our use of pretexts to avoid it are natural. One of the methods, and a very superficial one, is the assertion that deep things are sophisticated things, unintelligible to an uneducated mind. But the mark of real depth is its simplicity. If you should say, "This is too profound for me; I cannot grasp it", you are self-deceptive. For you ought to know that nothing of real importance is too profound for anyone. It is not because it is too profound, but rather because it is too uncomfortable, that you shy away from the truth. Let us not confuse the sophisticated things with the deep things of life. The sophisticated things do not concern us ultimately and it does not matter whether we understand them or not. But the deep things must concern us always, because it matters infinitely whether we are grasped by them or not.

There is a more serious fact about the road to the depth which can be used as an excuse by those who wish to avoid it. The depth in religious language is often used to express the dwelling place of the evil forces, of the daemonic powers, of death and hell. Is not the road into the depth a road into the realm which is controlled by these forces? Are there not the elements of destructiveness and morbidity in the longing for depth? When an American friend of mine expressed to a group of German refugees his admiration of the German depth, we asked ourselves whether we could accept that praise. Was not that depth the soil out of which the most daemonic forces of modern history sprang? Was not that depth a morbid and destructive depth?

Let me answer these questions by telling you an old and beautiful myth: When the soul leaves the body, it must pass over many spheres where daemonic forces rule; and only the soul that knows the right and powerful word can continue its way to the ultimate depth of the Divine Ground. No soul can avoid these tests. If we consider the battles of the saints of all times, of the prophets and the reformers, and of the great creators in all realms, we can recognize the truth of that myth. Everyone has to face the deep things of life. That there is danger is no excuse. The danger must be conquered by knowledge of the liberating word. The German people and many people in all nations did not know the word, and therefore, missing the ultimate and saving depth, were caught by the evil forces of the depth.

There is no excuse which permits us to avoid the depth of truth, the only way to which lies through the depth of suffering. Whether the suffering comes from outside and we take it upon ourselves as the road to the depth, or whether it be chosen voluntarily as the only way to deep things; whether it be the way of humility, or the way of revolution; whether the Cross be internal, or whether it be external, the road runs contrary to the way we formerly lived and thought. That is why Isaiah praises Israel, the Servant of God, in the depths of its suffering; and why Jesus calls those blessed who are in the depth of sorrow and persecution, of hunger and thirst in both body and spirit; and why He demands the loss of our lives for the sake of our lives. That is why two great revolutionaries, Thomas Muenzer of the sixteenth century and Karl Marx of the nineteenth century, speak in similar terms of the vocation of those who stand at the limits of humanity in the depths of emptiness, as Muenzer calls it; in the depth of inhumanity, as Marx calls it those of the proletariat to whom they pointed as the bearers of a saving future.

And as it is in our lives, so it is in our thought: every element seems to be reversed. Religion and Christianity have often been accused of an irrational and paradoxical

character. Certainly much stupidity, superstition and fanaticism have been connected with them. The command to sacrifice one's intellect is more daemonic than divine. For man ceases to be man if he ceases to be an intellect. But the depth of sacrifice, of suffering, and of the Cross is demanded of our thinking. Every step into the depth of thought is a breaking away from the surface of former thoughts. When this breaking away occurred in men like Paul, Augustine and Luther, such extreme suffering was involved that it was experienced as death and hell. But they accepted such sufferings as the road to the deep things of God, as the spiritual way, as the way to truth. They expressed the truth they envisioned in spiritual words that is, in words which were contrary to all surface reasoning, but harmonious with the depth of reason, which is divine. The paradoxical language of religion reveals the way to the truth as a way to the depth, and therefore as a way of suffering and sacrifice. He alone who is willing to go that way is able to understand the paradoxes of religion.

The last thing I want to say about the way to the depth concerns one of these paradoxes. The end of the way is joy. And joy is deeper than suffering. It is ultimate. Let me express this in the words of a man who, in passionate striving for the depth, was caught by destructive forces and did not know the word to conquer them. Friedrich Nietzsche writes: "The world is deep, and deeper than the day could read. Deep is its woe. Joy deeper still than grief can be. Woe says: Hence, go! But joys want all eternity, want deep, profound eternity" Eternal joy is the end of the ways of God. This is the message of all religions. The Kingdom of God is peace and joy. This is the message of Christianity. But eternal joy is not to be reached by living on the surface. It is rather attained by breaking through the surface, by penetrating the deep things of ourselves, of our world, and of God. The moment in which we reach the last depth of our lives is the moment in which we can experience the joy that has eternity within it, the hope that cannot be destroyed, and the truth on which life and death are built. For in the depth is truth; and in the depth is hope; and in the depth is joy.