

Charlotte Perkins Gilman:

"I would look at my self as if it were a little creature in my hand, and stroke it softly, saying, 'You poor little thing! You do have a hard time, don't you.' When the burden seemed more than I could possibly stand I would say, 'Huh! You don't have to. It's up to God, and He can stand it.'"

"He" is merely a survival in terminology. This God I was so sure of, was not him or her, not limited by personality, but an inescapable, ever-acting force to be used. Once solidly convinced of this reliable power - nothing else matters much. That workable assumption was at the bottom of my cheerful calmness. But besides this basic strength there was a growing social philosophy which was like a sunrise. One may be contented or reconciled with one's individual life, yet in misery about the suffering and confusion of the world.

"Mr. Howells told me I was the only optimist reformer he ever met. Perhaps because I was not a reformer, but a philosopher. I worked for various reforms, as Socrates went to War when Athens needed his services, but we do not remember him as a soldier. My business was to find out what ailed society, and how most easily and naturally to improve it.

"It might be called the effort of a social inventor, trying to advance human happiness by the introduction of better psychic machinery. I was not depressed by the local and temporary misery I saw in the world, any more than by the long centuries of worse misery behind us. When humanity is grasped as a growing thing, one long, unbroken process, one is more impressed by its new advances than by its old mistakes.

"Moreover, I had from these childish years of happy castle-building, the mental capacity for keen enjoyment from percepts. To see in my mind a clear, attainable happiness and the way to get it, was a solid joy. What I saw in the world was not its foolish, unnecessary troubles, but its splendid possibilities; as a competent promoter sees in some tottering business the success he can make of it." (*)

* Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman" An Autobiography. Chapter XIII, Page 182,183

Digital Image, 2011. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.

I am inclined to think that this is the best of Gilman that I have seen - the promise that one may be contented with one's life and not feeling miserable about the suffering and confusion of the world. What she saw was not the foolish, unnecessary troubles but its splendid possibilities. What she really was working for was Charlotte Gilman's life. When you consider what she was doing forty years ago makes the New Dealers claim that they have discovered the need of a good life. As a matter of fact we have been discovering it - where shall we say - we can't go back far enough .