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To Thine Ownself be True, 1947.

WRHS
"TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE"
On Unifying Our Inner Life For Happiness



By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, January 19, 1947

The great words of the immortal Bard, Shakespeare, were spoken by Polonius to his son, Laertes: "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

This is indeed excellent advise for a father to give to his son, or for any man to give to another. No one who is false to himself can be true to another man. If you cannot rule your own life by the principle of integrity, you certainly will not scruple to ignore it in your dealings with other men. It is an excellent maxim, but one not so easy of application.

When you say that a man should be true to his own self, the question arises -- what self? A man is made up of many selves. Man's soul is a whole universe which is peopled with many beings. There are many facets to one's ego, many distinct phases of one's life. There are times when we are good, and times when we are bad. At times we are indifferently good or bad. Every human being is part animal, and part human and part divine. There are times when we are capable of ascending to very great heights. At times we descend to abysmal depths. We love and we hate. We are geniuses and we are mean. At times we are courageous and at times we are very cowardly -- and all the degrees in between. And in our literature there is frequent reference to the two inclinations which struggle for supremacy within every human being -- good inclinations and evil inclinations.

Now to which of these many selves are we to be true? If we are by temperament for example, irrational, or selfish or niggardly, or lazy, if by habit we are liars, are we to remain true to that self? And will that help us to be true to other men?

In the Temple of Apollo at Delphi are three maxims for the guidance of the men and women who came to that great sanctuary of the Ancient Greeks. The first of the three maxims was "Know Thyself!" The Greeks ascribed also to the Greek philosopher Thales, to that sage and law-giver that profound injunction -- ■ Know Thyself!

Man's most challenging task, is to know and to understand himself. It is an endless study for man -- how he thinks, how he feels, what are his resources, what

are his limitations, man's mind, man's emotional life, man's reflex actions. Those are part of an internal study of man -- "Know thyself!" But that is not enough. Not enough at all.

A man must also know other people. He must know how other human beings act, react. He must know how to adjust his life to the life of other people because man lives in a society and one's own well-being is determined not merely by what a man knows about himself, but with how a man knows how to adjust himself to folks about him, to other people, to society, community about him.

To know oneself is not to know other people. A man must have standards and ideals by which to correct and direct his own life, by which to organize the accumulated knowledge about himself and about other men. And even while man is trying to come to know himself, it is a life-long study for man and humanity. And even if he is seeking to understand other people, he must also try to understand what are the supreme requirements of man's life on earth, what are the supreme ideals that should become the mandates for conduct in his life.

And that is why our people did not place about the ark in their places of worship, "Know thyself!" They placed in front of their ark very often this challenging phrase -- "Know before Whom thou art standing." The beginning of all knowledge, of yourself, of other people, the beginning of all knowledge is reverence to God. And this reverence of God will help you to know and to understand yourself, and if in your quest you become early aware that there is a God, and that you are created in His image, you will therefore realize yourself most fully, most completely. When you aspire Godward, then you will be a happy human being.

What does it mean to revere God? It means to revere goodness, justice, truth, which are the essential attributes of God. When once you set these goals before you, your own life is organized for your own well being and for the well being of the community.

From this viewpoint a man is most true to himself, when he most nearly

approximates godliness. When a man is true to that self in him, the highest and the noblest, he can never be false to any man.

That is not very difficult. You can apply it to your own life very easily. If you want to find out which one of the selves in you is really your true self, just ask yourself by which self you would like to be known by the man or woman whom you love most. Even if you chose to ignore it, to subordinate it or distort it -- that is your true self. That is the self you are most proud of, the self by which you wish to be known by him whom you most love and admire in the world. That is how you would like to be known. That is the true crying for expression, fulfillment. That is the Prometheus in you trying to shake off the other selves in you, the lowly selves in you, trying to emancipate you.

And if you get to know that real self early and remain true to it and let it dominate your life, then the other selves will be coordinated. Then you will be a fortunate human being. That self will by coordinating the other selves help to bring unity and organization in your life which will contribute to your tranquility and happiness.

"To Thine Self Be True!" These ideas came to me rather forcibly in the last few weeks as I was reading two biographies of two great men. One is the biography of Louis D. Brandeis, by A. T. Mason. The other amazing biography is that of the great French novelist, Balzac, written by Stephan Zweig. These two biographies illustrated for me exactly what happens to men who are true to themselves, what happens to a man who remains true to himself and what happens to a man who does not remain true to himself. Mr. Mason subtitles his biography of Brandeis: "A Free Man's Life." Justice Brandeis' life was a very lone one. He died at the age of 85. There were many great interests in his life, many many activities in his life. He had far from a single track mind. He was a great lawyer, a great judge, a great molder of public opinion. He had numerous cultural and intellectual interests. He had many friends. He was identified with many movements. He was "bitterly despised, greatly loved, and also profoundly misunderstood." It was once said of him that he was "the most liked and the

most hated man at the bar in America." Yet his life was remarkably tranquil, unruffled. He went his appointed way undisturbed though storms raged around him. And people marveled at the majestic calm of the man, at his imperturbability, the imperturbability of this man who was essentially a fighter, a crusader, a social reformer, this man who was so bitterly maligned and attacked.

It wasn't that Justice Brandeis was a phlegmatic person. Quite the contrary. He would rise and did rise to moments of great indignation when confronted with evidences of wrong. He fought with relentless determination. And yet, everyone who knew him, as I knew him, sensed in him a great quietude of spirit, a calm and confidence.

You ask yourself, what was the key to that personality? The answer is quite simple. The author of the biography finds the key quite readily. He was a man who early came to know his own true self-- what he wanted out of life, what would most satisfactorily express himself. He wanted to be a free human being. That is why the author called his book "A Free Man's Life." He wanted to be a free human being. He realized that in order to be a free man he had to do certain things, to do justice, good. In order to be free, he led a simple life. He did not encumber himself with too many physical appurtenances. Though he was a wealthy man, he lived a simple life, almost an ascetic life. He simply did not want to encumber himself with too many things, desires, possessions. In order to be free, he wanted to be independent. He did not wish to be beholden to anyone for his success or for his financial independence. In order to be free he desired to be free of excessive ambition which enslaves human beings. He wishes also to be free from the chains of social convention from dogma which confines and constricts human beings. And in order to be free, he realized too that one can not be free unless there is freedom in the world, that freedom is something which had to be shared. Even in America he realized that people are only partially free and relatively free. So early in life he set before himself the task

of fighting for the freedom of others. He directed this freedom-seeking self to the extension of freedom around him. So he began to wage war on social injustice, on privilege, on money trust, on industrial feudalism, for better labor conditions, the improvement of labor and management relations. He became a champion of liberalism, emancipation. And when rather late in life he came close to his own people, the Jewish people, he realized the Jewish people was not free. He thrust himself heart and soul into the task of giving to his people a position of a free people in its own land. He became one of the foremost champions of Zionism.

Now Justice Brandeis was not successful in all the things he undertook which ordinarily embitter and frustrate a man. They did not in the case of Brandeis. He remained contented and happy to the twilight of life, because there was always in himself an inner light, an inner tranquility, because all through his life he had taken hold of his life, organized it and was true to his own true self.

Honore de Balzac -- by the way that is an amazing biography that of Stephan Zweig, one of the finest ever written of any man. Balzac was one of the greatest literary figures of all times, undoubtedly the foremost French novelist whose books will be read as long as any great literature remains in the world. This artist will be remembered because of his exuberant and overflowing artistic genius/with along Da Vinci, Shakespeare, Tolstoi, Goethe.

Balzac was 51 when he died. He wrote 74 novels in 20 years some of which are immortal masterpieces. This man was happiest when he wrote, when he expressed himself in great writing. That was his true self. He was a literary artist. And he would spend twelve to fifteen hours a day at his desk. He would begin writing at midnight when it was quietest and he would write without rest all through the night into the early hours of the morning. And in spite of the terrific effects of the hours of writing, he felt unpardonably happy. That was his life and he took great pride in it. He took great care when he produced his masterpieces.

It is said of him that he insisted on getting fifteen or twenty sets of galley proofs of a book before he could satisfy himself that what he wanted to say was said in the best possible manner. He was a most careful painstaking writer when he was engaged in writing great things. But up to the age of thirty, he was a cheap literary hack, a man who prostituted his pen to make money. Stephen Zweig says of him:

Prostitution is the only word that can be used for this kind of scribbling, and it was the worst kind of prostitution since it was practiced cold-bloodedly and solely with a view to making money quickly. He may, to begin with, have been swayed only by impatience to achieve his freedom, but once he had sunk deep enough and become used to easy profits, the descent grew steeper and steeper. He allowed his talents to be misused for lesser rewards, despite the large earnings he drew from his novels, and there was no literary iniquity that he could not stomach. Today, when his cloak of anonymity has become somewhat threadbare, we know that Balzac shrank from no literary sin. He patched other men's novels with scraps of his own and barefacedly stole other writers' plots and situations for his own works. With adroit impudence he undertook every kind of literary tailoring, in which the purloined material was pressed, lengthened, turned, dyed, and modernized. He supplied anything for which there was a demand, whether in the way of philosophy, politics, or causeries, always ready to meet his client's wishes, a brisk, skillful, unscrupulous workman, on call at any time and prepared to switch over to the production of any article that happened to be in fashion.

"It is pathetic to think of the kind of people with whom he associated in these dark years. He was the greatest storyteller of his age, yet he was nothing but the hireling of the scabbiest hole-and-corner publishers and wholesale book-hawkers of Paris. All this because he lacked self-confidence and was blind to his real destiny."

This great man who was head and shoulders above all men of genius, was a childish snob, a pitiful social climber who would sell his soul to be introduced into

to the members of nobility and he made himself ridiculous and an object of raillery by his foppish dress. He affected manners/^{with} which he hoped to impress high society in France. He added a "de" to his name to suggest to his contemporaries that he came from noble stock.

"Conscious though he was of the childishness of his snobbery, he was unable to suppress this worst of his weaknesses. The man who was producing the greatest of creative work of the century and could have walked in the presence of kings and princes with the unconcern of a Beethoven suffered from an absurd mania for the aristocracy. A letter from a duchess of the Faubourg St. Germain meant more to him than Goethe's praise. He would perhaps rather have become a Rothschild, living in a palace with servants, carriages, and a gallery of masterpieces, than have acquired immortality, and for a genuine patent of nobility signed by Louis Philippe he would have sold his soul. If his father had been able to step from the peasantry into the world of the prosperous bourgeoisie, why should he himself not take the further step into the aristocracy?"

"The same vigor which sixty years before had urged Balzac's father to exchange a thatched cottage in La Nougayrie for the wider opportunities of Paris was perhaps unconsciously now spurring on his son to rise still higher, but it is ludicrous that he should identify this higher goal with entry into a hitherto exclusive circle and not with his own creative achievement. It is an attitude of mind that cannot be analyzed rationally. We are faced with an incomprehensible paradox. In order to climb into a 'higher' sphere of society he submitted to humiliations all his life. In order to live in luxury, he condemned himself to forced labor. In order to appear elegant, he made himself look absurd. Unconsciously he was a living proof of the law which he demonstrated a hundred times in his novels -- that a master in one sphere can be a bungler when he ventures into another for which he is not fitted."

Balzac all his life was in debt although his books brought him substantial royalties and he could have lived in greatest comfort. These stupid social ambitions of his life drove him to fantastic business adventures which kept him in debt to the end of his life.

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His greatest ambition, his over-powering ambition was to build himself a palatial residence in Paris and to fill it with pictures, bric-a-brac, antiques and miscellaneous junk which he picked up in second hand shops in order to impress the world at the very time the world was being impressed by the literary art, at the very time he was carving out for himself a niche in the world. This man was a slave of his lowliest selves which were destroying him.

When he finally got what he wanted, he was 51. Chuck full of nick-nacks he finally brought his bride home with him, a woman he had wooed for many years because she had a lot of money. He finally brought her home to that Palace, and Balzac died.

"The law that governed Balzac's destiny held good to the end. His dreams could be transmuted into reality only in his books, not in his own life. With unutterable toil, desperate sacrifices, and glowing hopes he had provided a home in which to spend his last "twenty-five years" with the wife who had at long last yielded to his wooing at his side. When all was ready, he moved in -- only to die. He had designed for himself the perfect study in which to complete La comedie humaine, fifty further volumes of which were already planned, but he never wrote a line of it. His eyesight failed completely, and the only letter we possess from the rue Fortunee, addressed to Theophile Gautier, is in the handwriting of his wife, with a single line of postscript scrawled laboriously by Balzac himself: "I can no longer read or write."

"He had fitted up a handsome library in which he never opened a book." His drawing room was hung with gold damask for receptions to Parisian society that were never held."

So this man, this great man did not learn the lesson: "To Thine Own Self Be True." He tried to be true to many lowly selves in him and because of that his life was distraught with disillusionment and he died a sad human being.

There is a beautiful sentence in our Sacred Literature: "Walk thou before Me and be whole." That is it. And the only way to be whole is to be true to your best self, to organize your life to dominate the other selves.... There is food for thought in the biographies of these great men - one who early discovered his true self

and remain true to it, and one who never never did.



1) Polonius - Laertes. "This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man".
(a) Excellent advice to his son.

(a) Excellent advice. No one who is false to himself can be
true to other men. If you cannot rule your own
life by the principle of integrity - you certainly will not
scruple to ignore it in your dealings with other men.

2). It is a good maxim. But not easy of application.
When you say that a man should be true to his word
What self?

Q. man is made up of many selves. A man's soul is peopled with many beings. - facets, ~~the~~ ~~overgo~~ and yet distinct phases of the one life.

There are times when we are lost - lost - indifferent
we are part animal - and part human - and part divine

~~We are~~
At times we ascent great heights. descent beyond depth

We love and we hate. Generous - mean -

At times courage - cowardly - and all the degrees in between.

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To which of these selves are we to be true!

If we are by temperament variable, inconstant, selfish,

lazy, or by habit prevaricators - (liars) - are we to re-
main true to that self - and will that help us to be
true to other men?

3). The first of the 3 maxims inscribed on the Temple of Apollo
at Delphi - γνῶθι σεαυτὸν. - Ascribed to Thales
or, the 7 wise men of Greece - also to Solon.

① It is well - ~~but not enough~~ - Proposed, endless study
of man to know himself - how he thinks & feels -
resources ~~bankrupt~~ his ~~own~~ mind - his emotions - his reflexes -

But he must also know other folks - how they react -
and his relationship with them - Society

But even more so that he must have standards &
ideals by which to correct & direct his life.
even while he is trying to know himself.

4) Our people. γνῶθι σεαυτὸν - γνῶθι τοὺς ἄλλους
It will help you to know and understand yourself

if in your quest you are early aware that there
is a goal - and that you were created in His
image - and that you realize yourself most
fully - when you aspire for -
when you reverence, forgive, Truth, Justice, which
are the essential attributes, the Creator, the Creator.

5/ From this viewpoint - most you self is the one which ⁽³⁾
most nearly approximates ^{a pure, ideal -} of nobleness -
When a man is true to that self - in him - the highest
and noblest - he ~~will~~ ^{can} never be false to any man.

6/ Not as difficult as it appears -
Ask yourself which one of your many selves - you
would like to be known by, by the man or woman
whom you ^{most} admire & love ~~most~~!

That is your you self - even tho you choose to ignore
it - subordinate it - distort it.

That's the self - that's crying for expression - fulfillment
- Prometheus in you - tripping at the chains
of lonelier lives in you - emancipation

7/ If you get to know that self in you - early ^{time to it} & let it
dominate your life - fortunate being.
It will ^{coordinate} ~~master~~ all the other selves - bring them
into line - achieve unity organization in you
psychic - happy man.

8/ 2 Biographies - (1) Amos D. Sanders - Alphus Thomas
Mason. (2) Balzac - Stefan Zweig - illustrated
of what happens to men who are true - & who are not true to men like

Mr. Mason subtitled his biography of B. - "A Free
man's life -

- A long life - died at 85 - and there were many interests
and activities in that ^{life} ~~life~~ ^{life} - He was a great lawyer,
a great judge, a great holder of public thought.

He was "bitterly despised, greatly loved, and profoundly misun-
derstood."

It was once said of him that he was "the most liked and the
most hated man at the bar in America"

And yet his ^{inner} life was remarkably tranquil, untroubled;
He went his appointed way ^{undisturbed} ~~undisturbed~~ ^{undisturbed} tho the
storms roared.

Men marvelled at the majestic calm simplicity of his
crusade & social reforms - this man who was so
bitterly maligned & attacked.

He was not phlegmatic - rise to great indignation
when great injustice was done - He fought with
relentless determination -

What was the key? He had early come to know
his own self - what he wanted most - & what
would express the highest thrust in him

He wanted to be a "free human being" - Realized
that in order to do that -

① Simple life - free from ^{too many} ~~physical~~ ^{desires} ~~ambitions~~ ^{ambitions} & the
to acquire wealth - he did not lead the life of a wealthy
man - a simple, ascetic life - ~~chained~~ ^{free} ~~from~~ ^{physical} ~~ambitions~~ ^{ambitions}

(2) Independent b/f - not beholden for his financial inst to any one -

(3) Free from excessive ambitions & the craving for power

(4) Free from the chains of ^{social} conventions, from dogma and
hide-bound traditions

(5) Free in a world of free men - Even in America
men were only partially & relatively free

(6) And so he set himself many tasks - all directed by
the master self in him - freedom-loving self

- Waged war on social injustice - Proletariat - Money
Trust - Industrial Revolution
- Better labor conditions - Hours, labor
minimum wage - Better labor-management relations
a champion of liberation

(7) Search for Freedom -

(8) Was not successful in all things - Happily - integrated
b/f - inner strength - inner light - inner tranquility

9/ Balzac - An amazing biography -

(1) One of the greatest liter. b/pers of all times -

The foremost novelist of France - "Comedie humaine"

A titan of literature - Created - To be remembered with the

colossal b/pers of art & literature - for his
exuberant & overflowing ~~imaginative~~ ^{applied} creative genius, with Da
Vinci - Shakespeare - Goethe & Tolstoy

He was 51 when he died. - Wrote 74 novels - in 20 yrs ⁶
Marquises - that 1 time - sketches -

= Happiest when working them - His time self ⁽¹³⁶⁾ ¹³⁸
12-15 hrs a day. - Prof. reading ^{6-7 hrs} ¹⁴⁶ - 15-16 times

But it was years before he found himself - and even then -
torn by his other selves - Subject to

① Up to the age of 30 - ~~trash~~ - a literary hack - (49)

② This great man was a childish soul - a pitiful
social climber - would sell his soul for the honor
of an introduction to a member, the nobility.
And made himself ridiculous + an object of ridicule
by his foppish dress - affected manners +
then added a "de" to his name - (128-129)

③ All his life in debt - Tho his books sold him
substantial royalties - these social ambitions -
and fantastic business + disastrous bus. ventures
kept him in debt -

④ His great ambition - a palatial residence in
Paris - stocked with pictures - antiques +
biv-broc
+ ~~unpleasant junk~~ - second-hand stuff
Knew - ~~himself~~ to impress the world -
And when he finally got his wish - at the age of 51 -
bought his bride Madame de Haustra - (383)

10) To them our self be true!

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