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What Makes Greatness?, 1950.

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WHAT IS GREATNESS?

Sunday, January 15, 1950

When one discusses the subject of the great of the earth, one cannot help but be impressed with the fact of how few are really remembered at all by most of the world, not to speak of by all the world. Above the levelling and covering earth of oblivion, how few are really the peaks which rise up in human remembrance. Of the millions of people who lived in this country in the last generation, how many are remembered? Of the hundreds of millions who lived upon earth in all the past generations, how many are remembered? How many names are recorded even in the most voluminous of biographic encyclopedias? I imagine that out of 100,000 people perhaps one is remembered by humanity for longer than a decade or a generation or more. Most are completely forgotten.

In a narrower group, in a closer society, in the family circle the memory of someone may be cherished or retained for a longer time. The closer the contact, the longer the survival. But for the generality of mankind, few indeed are the personalities which tower into enduring remembrance.

Now, there is occasion here for some very sombre reflections on the part of all men, and more especially, on the part of those who regard themselves so important, so indispensable in their lives and who lord it with such fussy conceit and with so much of strut and splash over their little world and in their little day. There is a lesson in utmost humility in the contemplation of all this, a lesson, I am afraid, that very few people indeed ever learn.

The truly great of the earth, of course, escape total oblivion, but their number is very few, very small, and even they are screened and sifted by the oncoming generations of mankind as their relative importance in the scheme of a changing and advancing society declines. Thus, for example, there were people who were held in highest esteem say, in the 13th century or in the 16th century or in the 18th century, who are barely remembered today. Very few indeed are those who occupy a per-

manent and unchallenged throne in mankind's hall of fame.

In discussing this subject - What is Greatness, and Who are the Great of the Earth - one or two facts should be noted first of all. There is no committee of judges which has been authorized by mankind and assigned by mankind to designate the candidates for its Hall of Fame. The selection is a free choice of all men of all ages. Some will prefer one and others will prefer another. What a man or an age regards as of paramount value to society will naturally determine his choice and his preferences. Presumably a man who has a strong esthetic interest and who regards art as the supreme expression of human greatness - such a man is likely to people his Pantheon, his Hall of Fame, with a preponderant number of great artists, painters and sculptors and musicians, poet and writers. Those who regard religion as the most important factor in civilization will do the same and will people their Hall of Fame with a predominant number of religious leaders, moral path-finders of the world. Those who regard science as the most important factor in life will naturally put scientists in a preponderant number. And it is not at all easy to waive these fundamental interests and factors in civilization. In the balance of appraisal to determine which is the more important enterprise of the human spirit and then to select and assign a proportion or a quota of greatness for each field - such a percentage to scientists and another percentage to philosophers, still another to artists, etc. It's quite impossible. Nor is there any point whatsoever in fixing an arbitrary number for the great of the earth - 10 greatest, 20 greatest, 500 greatest - and then in trying to fill that number with selected individuals. Greatness is not confined to decades or scores, to a dozen or to a gross. History is not an honorary body like the French Academy whose number is permanently fixed and to which an individual is elected by the members of the Academy. That may be a very interesting pasttime to select the 20 greatest or the 50 greatest, but such a selection has really no value and no meaning.

What is important - what is very important - is for people to have a true understanding and appreciation of greatness, to be able properly to evaluate greatness, to know whom to call great, and especially how to cooperate with greatness.

Now, there are various measures of greatness. A great man may be said to be one who has greatly affected the lives of men and nations for good or evil, for weal or woe. Anyone who has made what we call history, anyone who has affected the course of human events may be called great. If this is the measure of our evaluation, then in such a category of greatness we should have to include names like Hitler and Mussolini, Attila and Genghis Khan, Caesar and Napoleon, Alexander and Tamerlane. They certainly loom large in wars and conquests, in the rise and fall of empires, in the death and tragedy which they brought into the lives of countless millions. They are unforgettable for the scourge of mankind that they were, for the yoke of oppression which they placed upon the shoulders of myriads of human beings, for the ruin which they wrought; indeed, "they made the earth to tremble and made the world a wilderness", as the Prophet says.

In my boyhood the history books which we used in school were filled with such names. Today these have been relegated to a much less important place in history. Leaders and heroes of a different stamp are being singled out for study and for emulation. For it has been realized that in spite of the evil which these brought into the lives of men, despite the manner in which they affected nations, worlds, they were not indispensable to civilization, that civilization could have gotten along without them, that they are definitely dispensable, and therefore, not great. They may have been great rogues or great criminals or great warriors, but they are not great men. Perhaps Isaiah's judgment of such greatness will ultimately come to prevail: "Because thou hast destroyed thy land, thou hast slain thy people, the seed of evil-doers shall not be named forever. The maggot is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee."

Shall we not therefore say, as Benjamin Franklin said, "There is no greatness without goodness." The great are those who have changed an age, or the spirit of an age, or the minds of an age for good. The great are those who, by the good which they wrought for mankind, have become the indispensable men upon whose shoulders civilization rests. The Rabbis said: "The great man (whom they called the Sadyk), the noble man - he is the foundation of the world." The great are the foundation of the world. It makes little difference through what medium this goodness of the great was imparted to mankind - whether it was the scientific medium, or the spiritual or the esthetic - provided it was a new and positive good, a new and positive good, which proved a permanent increment in the wellbeing in the race of man.

Of Father Abraham, the Bible says, God said to him: "I will make thy name great in that I will make you a blessing." It is the blessing which a man bestows upon mankind in terms of new truth, of new goodness, of new beauty that makes him great.

We sometimes call a great man an illustrious man. That's a good word - illustrious - because that word means not only the lustre and the brightness which is attached to the name of the man, not only that his name shines bright, but that he is one who brings light and illumination to the world. A great man, in other words, as I see it, is a great "Revealer", one sheds new light, one who opens closed doors, one who shows the new road to the groping sons of man. Someone has said that a great man is the man who does a thing for the first time. Well, that is true but only in a limited sense. It must be an important thing which he does for the first time, and it must be a beneficent thing which he does for the first time, and it must be an enduring ingredient in human wellbeing.

There are people who are endowed by nature with unusual minds, encyclopedic in range, men endowed with powerful memories, gifted linguists, keen intellects. Well, they are extraordinary people - there's no doubt about that, but they are not necessarily great. The great are those who have discovered something very significant

to the life of man and who have made that something significant available to mankind. It need not be exclusively in the realm of science because the life of man is not exclusively a scientific life, nor can civilization endure exclusively on the foundations of science. Those, for example, who have made available to mankind the vision of human freedom, the end of all human slavery and have inspired men to achieve that freedom - they are among the great of the earth - a Moses, a Lincoln belong to the great of the earth. The prophets and seers of mankind pointed the way to a better way of life, to a juster society. The Buddha, the Confucious, Jesus, the Mohammed, Gandhi - these are of the great of the earth, and many others. Those who have by their personal martyrdom in defense of the freedom of the human mind and the human spirit, and who have inspired other men to stand by truth and for truth at all cost - they are of the great of the earth. Those who have pointed the way to the ending of war, to the establishment of a peaceful society, to international cooperation - men of the type of Wilson - they belong to the great of the earth. Men who have taught men how to live in brotherhood, in tolerance - who have taught men to end clannishness and fanaticism and bigotry - of the type of Lessing and a host of others - they belong to the great of the earth. Men who have explored the human mind and the human psyche, who have opened up the undiscovered continents of human behavior, the creative philosophers, psychologists of the world - the Platos and the Aristotles, Epictitus, Roger Bacon, Spinoza, Locke and James and Freud, and a host of others - they are the great of the earth. They extended the boundaries of the intellectual life of man. They increased his world and they gave him greater confidence in the world in which he lives. And those, who through the medium of literature and art and music, have opened up new vistas for the spirit of man, the forging of new instruments, the scaling of new heights, penetrating deeper into the glory of sound, color and form - the poets and the musicians, the painters and the sculptors and the dramatists, the writers of all ages - the Homers and the Sophocles, the Dantes and the Shakespeares, the Goethes, Phideas, Michael Angelo, De Vinci,

Rembrandt and a host of others, and the Beethovens and the Brahms and the Chopins - a host of musical geniuses - they are of the great of the earth. One might extol one a bit; the other, the other - one might grade them differently. That is not the important thing. The important thing is that all of them have brought something new, something good, something beautiful into the lives of men and women of mankind.

And of course, in the realm of science all those who have made new and significant contributions belong to the great of the earth. And their number is increasing rapidly in the last few generations which have been the scientific generations par excellence in history. Most of the great inventors, discoverers, and the earliest of them are really anonymous. Those who invented fire, the wheel, the plow, and the tools of men; those who invented planting of seeds for food and domestication of animals; those who invented the alphabet are the great of the earth - they are anonymous. They may be collectively great because one never knows whether these things came about as the result of the inventive genius of a single individual, but they made the survival of the human race possible. Nothing that has been discovered in the last hundreds of years is comparable in importance to those what we now call primitive discoveries of the human race.

Science has become so vast in our day that it has been departmentalized in every field, whether it be anthropology or astronomy or biology or physics, chemistry or medicine or in other department. There have been great men who have made monumental historic contributions which have widened the horizons of the human race, which have increased the power of man.

It is interesting in this connection to note that no race and no people has any monopoly upon greatness. These scientists and these colossal figures in the fields of art, literature, religion, come from no one race and no one people, no one continent - all races, all colors, all peoples are represented, and civilization is the

collective achievement of the whole human race through the great men which nigh every people on earth has produced and is producing today.

Greatness, then, is that which is fruitful - let me put it that way. In our Hebrew vocabulary we really have no word corresponding to the word, great, as we are using it now. "Adol" hardly covers the full implication of the word, greatness - great men, as we use it in English. A great man was called by our people "elan gadol" - a great tree. That's the attribute which they ascribe to him. Great men were called "ashrelavleve" - the great tamarisks - the tamarisks were the symbol of strength and eminence. A great scholar was called "bal eshkolot" - a cluster of grapes, full of wine, full of the richness of life-giving and spirit-stimulating wine, the wine of the spirit.

Our people clearly understood that greatness was something with fruitfulness, with fructifying, with giving food to the mind and to the spirit of man.

One gains a great insight into the psychology of a people by observing the type of man whom that people regarded as supreme. Some peoples looked upon the warrior as the supreme type of a human being - many people. Many people still do. The Nazis exalted the warrior as the supreme human being. Other people looked upon the High Priest as supreme, or the athlete or the artist or the scientist or the statesman. Among the Jewish people it was the Tsadik who was held in highest esteem, the noble man who nobly served God and man. It wasn't that the Jewish people underestimated the importance of other types of human beings or even of the warrior type. King David was a great warrior, and the Bible records his victories, but when it came to build the Temple, this great man was told that he could not build it. He was not worthy. "You will not build the House dedicated to My name because you spilled a great deal of blood."

It is not the warrior who is looked upon by our people as the indispensable man in society, as the foundation of society. It is the Tsadik. In the Book of Ecclesiasticus written by that very wise physician of the third century before the common era, we come across this interesting verse: "Great men and judges and potentates should be honored; yet is there none of them greater than he that fears the Lord." Now, when our sages spoke about fearing the Lord, they had much more in mind than fearing the Lord. In the first place, the words "fearing the Lord" is a poor translation of the Hebrew "Yahreh". When the Bible uses the word "Yahreh", it does not mean "fear the Lord", but means "revere the Lord" - reverence for God, reverence for His law. Judaism is not a religion based upon fear, but upon reverence. But reverence of God and reverence of His law meant living the noblest kind of a life that a human being could possibly live, to please God and by so doing, revere His name. And the great of the earth are those who point the way to mankind how most nobly to live in the sight of God, how most nobly to fulfill the moral law which God gave to mankind.

Now, if this is so, if the philosophy of the Jew is the correct one, as I believe it is, then a measure of greatness ~~is~~ is within the reach of all human beings. The average man - the average man can attain a measure of greatness by fearing, serving the Lord because that is not the exclusive privilege of the uniquely endowed and the exceptionally equipped human being. What I am referring to now is greatness in personal living even if it is not recorded in history, greatness in personal living. To seek all the light, all the truth, all the beauty, all the goodness that one can is to follow in the footsteps of the great and is to live greatly. And by so doing we make a great contribution to civilization because the strength of a civilization consists not merely in the contributions of the few revealers of new truths, but in the loyal and faithful discipleship of the many who proceed to help build the kind

of a society which the great envisioned. It is leader and follower together that make up civilization. To eschew littleness and selfishness and pretense and low ambitions is to partake of greatness; to partake of this noble experiment, to bring about the great society on earth; to defend freedom, everyone of us within the sphere of his influence - to defend freedom and human rights whenever and wherever they are challenged; to work for peace and tolerance so that we, in our little circle, may become a blessing and so our name, too, may become great; to cultivate uninterruptedly in ourselves the best, to cultivate our minds, our spirits so as to appreciate the worth of the great. This is to be a companion of the great. This is to have your being in their radiant world.

Therefore, my dear friends, while it is not given to everyone, and in fact, while it is given to only a few to be especially - I will not say privileged or favored, because greatness is usually not the crown of glory but the crown of thorns - the great are usually those who suffer greatly - while it is given to only a few to be revealers, path-finders, explorers and discoverers of new truths, it is given to every human being to link up his life and his destiny with the adventure towards greatness, with the program of civilization. This is not a task which is beyond the reach of the average human being. "For this commandment which I command thee this day", we read in our Bible - "it is not far off". It is not in the heavens that a man need say, who will go up to the heavens and bring it down to us, and it is not beyond the seas that a man need say, who will go beyond the seas for us and bring it to us. "The thing is very near." At your hand! Within your circle, in your business, in your profession, in your community. You can identify yourself with causes and movements and activities which make for the great society. You can, on the other hand, by isolating yourself in your own petty interest, in your own ego, in your own selfishness, in your narrow family circle - you can make of your life utterly insignificant, utterly unimportant in the work of building a civilization for tomorrow.

In a measure, then, greatness is within the reach of all of us, a special kind of greatness. To be great in the company of the great, and to work for the great society. There is a tremendous satisfaction - a tremendous satisfaction - during our lifetime - a tremendous satisfaction in all of it, in the lives of those about us, and even though history may not record our names, we do not have to live for history. We live for ourselves and our dear ones, for our community, and we live for God and in the sight of God. God always remembers. God never forgets.

