

"Thoughts on Man's Purpose in Life...and Other Matters"
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Voltaire once said: "Not to be occupied and not to exist are one and the same thing for man.". With those few words Voltaire captured the essence of a purpose to life: to work, to create, to excel, and to be concerned about the world and its affairs.

"We measure ourselves by many standards," said William James, nearly a century ago. "Our strength and our intelligence, our wealth and even our good luck, are things which warm our heart and make us feel a match for life. But deeper than all such things, and able to suffice unto itself without them, is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth." Man has a large capacity for effort, but it is so much greater than we think it is, few ever reach this capacity.

Man's work begins with his job, or profession. Having a vocation is always somewhat of a miracle, like falling in love. I can understand why Luther said that a man is justified by his vocation, for it is already a proof of God's favor. But having a vocation means more than punching a time clock. One must guard against banality, ineptitude, incompetence, mediocrity.

We as people seem inclined to accept average or mediocre performance. Mediocrity can destroy us just as surely as perils far more famous. It is important that we remember to distinguish between what it means to fail at a task and what it means to be mediocre. There is all the difference in the world between the life lived with dignity and style which ends up failing, and one which achieves power and glory yet is dull, unoriginal, unreflective, and mediocre. In a real sense, what matters is not so much whether we make a lot of money, hold a prestigious job, or whether we don't; what matters is that we become people who seek out others with knowledge and enthusiasm - that we become people who can enjoy our own company. In the end, learning to avoid mediocrity gives us all a chance to discover that success really comes in making ourselves into educated individuals, able to recognize that there is always a difference between living with excellence and living with mediocrity. Sherlock Holmes once told Watson, "Watson, mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself. It takes talent to recognize genius." To which he could have added it takes talent to know what counts is condemning mediocrity not in others but in ourselves.

It is a device of the devil to let sloth into the world. One cannot work at his profession alone without stagnating: some time away from the job can be as much or more important in man's overall development. Intellectually, we must never stop growing. Our conscience should never release us from concern for the problems of the day. Our minds must be forever skeptical yet questioning. We must strive to be singularly free from that failing so common to man, deplored by Pascal in the "Pense'es," of filling our leisure with meaningless distractions so as to preclude the necessity of thought. To be an intellectual in the fullest sense, one's mind must be in constant movement.

Intelligence - the central virtue of moral life - is being able to judge the

limitations of knowledge. Though there is no substitute for intelligence, it is not enough. People may be intelligent but lack the courage to act. To find a purpose to life, one must be willing to act, to put excellence in one's work and concern for what is right before personal safety.

No professional man has the right to prefer his own personal peace to the happiness of mankind; his place and duty are to be in the frontline of struggling men, not in the unperturbed rank of those who keep themselves aloof from life. If a profession is to have its proper place in the further development of society, it must be increasingly dissatisfied with things the way they are. If there is to be any exaltation in our work, we must learn to reach out, not to struggle for that which is just beyond, but to grasp at the result which seems almost infinite. As Robert Browning wrote "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's heaven for."

The deepest joy in life is to be creative. To find an undeveloped situation, to see the possibilities, to decide upon a course of action, and then devote the whole of one's resources to carrying it out, even if it means battling against the stream of contemporary opinion, is a satisfaction in comparison with which superficial pleasures are trivial. But to create, you must care. You must be willing to speak out.

A certain measure of courage in the private citizen is necessary to the good conduct of the State. Otherwise men who have power through riches, intrigue, or office will administer the State at will and ultimately to their private advantage. For the citizen, this courage means a frank exposition of a problem and a decrying of the excess of power. It takes courage to do this, for in our polite society frank speech is discouraged. But when this attitude relates to questions involving the welfare or survival of the Nation, it is singularly unfitting to remain evasive. It is not only possible, but in fact the duty of everyone to state precisely what knowledge and conscience compel him to say. Only complete candor and frankness, deep respect for the facts, however unpleasant and uncomfortable, great efforts to know them where they are not readily available and drawing conclusions guided by rigorous logic can bring many of today's problems forward.

James Cambon said: "We have to defend the country against mediocrity: Mediocrity of soul, mediocrity of ideas, mediocrity of action. We must also fight against it in ourselves." It is a lonely and hard thing to speak out against mediocrity or the evils of the system. One feels the frustration which arises only in those who are compelled to act. The detached spectator does not feel this helplessness because he never tries to surmount the problems that exist.

The spectator is a man who has no conscience, who doesn't die, who cannot laugh, and who is unaware of personal responsibility. He does not necessarily do wicked things, but he does passive things. There are many spectators in the world today who choose passivity. They will do anything so that their accustomed life is undisturbed, anything so as not to cross over into hardship today; at the same time, they hope tomorrow will take care of itself.

DECLINING RESPONSIBILITY

Most of the work in the world today is done by those who work too hard; they comprise a "nucleus of martyrs." The greater part of the remaining workers' energy goes into complaining. Employees today seldom become emotional about their organization or its output; they are only interested in getting ahead. And many organizations are killing their employees with kindness, undercutting their sense of responsibility with ever-increasing permissiveness. This is a fatal error, for where responsibility ends, performance ends also.

The sense of responsibility for doing a job right seems to be declining. In fact the phrase "I am not responsible" has become a somewhat standard response in our society to complaints of a breakdown in the system. This response is a semantic error. Generally what a person means is: "I cannot be held legally liable." Yet, from a moral or ethical point of view the statement is quite true. The person or organization taking this way out is truly not responsible; he is irresponsible.

The unwillingness to act and to accept responsibility is a symptom of America's growing self-satisfaction with the status quo. The result is a paralysis of the spirit, entirely uncharacteristic of Americans during the previous stages of their history. Even the complaints about high taxes and high prices are illusory. Behind them is hidden the reality that the majority, in terms of sheer creature comfort, never had it so good. Those who are still on the outside looking in are not strong or numerous enough to make a political difference.

A major reason why so large a majority is smugly docile is that it has accepted the unwritten rules of the game: Don't rock the boat as long as you get your cut. Why become worked up over corruption as long as there are enough benefits of the fallout to go around? Once the acceptance of corruption becomes sufficiently widespread, effective exposure seems threatening to too many people and interests. Clamor for closing loopholes declines in direct proportion to the number of people who benefit from loopholes of their own. Freedom of speech seems less important when the majority persuades itself that it is not likely ever to want to speak out to complain...

We shall not get through troubles safely until a considerable number of Americans acknowledge that they themselves are a part of the process by which the society will be made whole.

The crucial element of hope amid the current drift lies in the recollection of what the American spirit of activist optimism has so often accomplished - when it was rallied by its leaders and philosophers to a vision of shared goals.

For the person who strives to excel, to shoulder responsibility and to speak out, there is an enemy wherever he turns. The enemy is a man who has total willingness to delegate his worries about the world to officialdom. He assumes that only the people in authority are in a position to know and act. He believes that if vital information essential to the making of public decisions is withheld, it can only be for a good reason. If a problem is wholly or partially scientific in nature, he will ask no questions even though the consequences of the problem are political or social.

The enemy is any man whose only concern about the world is that it stay

in one piece during his own lifetime. He is invariably successful and regards his good fortune not as a challenge to get close to the real problems of the age, but as proof of the correctness of everything he does. Nothing to him is less important than the shape of things to come or the needs of the next generation. Talk of the legacy of the past or of human destiny leaves him cold. Historically, he is a disconnected man. He is an enemy because he is detached from the kind of concern for the rights of unborn legions that will enable the world itself to become connected and whole.

To struggle against these enemies, and against apathy and mediocrity, is to find the purpose of life.

EDUCATION

There are five basic goals for education. When I say "basic," I mean goals that apply to everyone - men or woman, rich or poor.

Goal 1: To learn to understand, appreciate, and take care of the natural world we live in.

Most people go through life unaware of the fascinating complex of events around them, of climate and terrain and vegetation and animals and people and their interrelatedness. Civilized people need to know not only what the environment is like, but how to keep it habitable.

Goal 2: To understand, appreciate, and learn to live with the fellow inhabitants of our planet. Every child must learn about the races and people of the world and the rich variety of the world's cultures. He must know something of the history of men and nations. He must learn that there are many people in the world who differ from him profoundly in habits, ideas, and ways of life. He must perceive these differences not as occasions for uneasiness or hostility but as challenges to his capacity for understanding.

Goal 3: To have an area of esthetic experience - and I would include the religious and spiritual with the esthetic. The esthetic experience is the organization of our feelings - the search for and the creation of orders in our affective life. The significances, the meanings that we perceive, are private. To give ourselves, for at least a part of the time, to the lonely contemplation of some kind of beauty and order is also to enrich ourselves so that we have something to contribute to the lives of others.

Goal 4: To earn a living. This can be learned in school or out, and at any level from humble work to highly paid, professional skills. Each of us needs to feel, sometime in life, that his services are important enough so that someone other than the welfare department is willing to pay to keep him alive. Those who have never proved their usefulness remain forever at a disadvantage, because work is the basic way which most of us relate to the world.

But work is, in a profound way, held in contempt by our educational system. Students believed to be low in academic talent are steered into vocational programs, while academically more gifted students are steered away from them, as if they were too good to be made to work. Such a distinction is arbitrary and invidious and just as rain falls equally on the just and unjust, it

inflicts an injustice both on the academically slow and on the advanced. Throughout our high schools and colleges, there should be maintained an active relationship between the academic world and the world where people earn a living.

Goal 5: To learn some kind of critical or intellectual method. I regard this as the most important of all. We have all learned that we live in an age of an information explosion. But we are also in the middle of a misinformation explosion. With the proliferation of mass communications media, we are surrounded by hawkers, pitchman, hard and soft sells, persuaders hidden and overt. Bombarded daily with millions of words by print and electronic media, we all have to have some kind of critical method by means of which to decide whom and what to believe, and to what degree.

How is this propaganda evaluated? It cannot always be analyzed by scientific method, since propagandistic statements are rarely capable of proof; but it can be approached with a scientific attitude. Some kind of discipline in the orientations of science is necessary to inculcate a critical attitude towards words, our own as well as those of others, so that our lives may be governed by skepticism and respect for fact that characterize the rational mind.

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING

The proof of living, as Norman Cousins has said, "is in the memory, and all of us, through reading, can live five or six lifetimes in one. Through reading, the sluices of the mind open up, making accessible a range of experiences otherwise beyond personal reach." In reading books, as we grow both emotionally and intellectually, Marya Mannes feels "a person can be fascinated by movies and diverted by television, but they are series of snacks. Books are the real nourishment of the human mind."

It has been said of books that they "cause us to reflect on our own perceptions, make distinctions of new areas of reality and become sensitive to them. It is as our teachers used to say - through reading you start thinking about the world in new ways." It has also been said that "the essence of a classic is that it arises from such profound depths in human experience that it speaks to us, who live centuries later in vastly different cultures as the voice of our own experience; it helps us to understand ourselves better and enriches us by releasing echoes within ourselves which we may not have known were there."

When we read a truly great book, we are lost in admiration. A great book is so powerful that it forces us immediately to reread it, because we have been altered in the process of reading it.

Macaulay said of great literature:

"These are old friends who are never seen with new faces, who are the same in wealth and poverty, in glory and in obscurity. With the dead there is no rivalry. In the dead there is no change. Plato is never sullen. Cervantes is never petulant. Demosthenes never comes unseasonably. Dante never stays too long. No difference of political opinion can alienate Cicero. No heresy can

excite the horror of Bossuet."

It is crucial that we inspire the young to read; for if they do not read, they will never change this world or beat its manipulators. They might start with the Federalist Papers and work through Lincoln and Winston Churchill to learn not only the art of persuasion but the content of integrity.

To be effective in the world, it is not sufficient to be well-read. One must also write clearly and succinctly. It is not easy to write well. It means studying to gain a good vocabulary, and practicing to learn how to use it. Joseph Conrad compared writing to carrying heavy bails under a low rope on a hot day. It has been said that good writing is inherently subversive; I agree. Good writing can last for years, stimulating, and inspiring those who read it, and causing them to reassess their views of the world and its institutions. But then, of course, we have gone full circle to the importance of reading books.

THE PAST

We need to regain some of the certainties of the past. For the uneasiness and the malaise of our time is due to a root cause: In our politics and economy, in family life and religion, in practically every sphere of our existence the certainties of the 18th and 19th centuries have disintegrated or been destroyed. Much of the social cement that has held our society together - shared values, strong family structure, the influence of the church and the local community - has been dissolving steadily over the years. At the same time, no new sanctions or justifications for the new routines we live, and must live, have taken hold. So there is no acceptance and there is no rejection, no sweeping hope and no sweeping rebellion. There is no real plan of life.

Many certainties of the past have been lost through ill-founded criticism of past customs and institutions. It is easy in the light of present-day knowledge and achievement to ridicule and condemn the men, the ideas, and the customs of a past age. But this is a mistake. Much of the wisdom and most of the beauty of the past is lost because we do not have sufficient knowledge and imagination to divest ourselves of our modern refinements and to relive the struggles, the hopes and fears, and faiths and beliefs of our ancestors who were in contact, like us, with the mystery of life.

I would urge a more sympathetic understanding of the past, so that we may recapture some of its beauty. Certainly, some of the past is not worthy of preservation. But much is. In nature, the demolition process is a living process; the destruction of the old is caused by and is part of the generation of new life. In all areas of man's existence, the present is the fruit of the past and the seed of the future.

RELIGION

Religion is the area that merits a more sympathetic understanding by modern

intellectuals. For religion has not so much declined as it has changed. It is true that religion no longer has direct influence on the large corporate structures that have emerged in the past 400 years, such as government, business, labor, the military, and education. It has had to replenish many of its "mysteries" to the explanations of rational science. Man's increased capacity for abstract thought has made a similar penetration of religion's myths, which are now treated more as metaphors than absolutes. And finally, the church doors have been thrown open to free choice, to more explicit or individual formulations than previously.

What has not changed are the basic functions of religion: Supplying a faith or meaning for coping with the questions of the human condition; providing for a feeling of belonging, in the broadest sense.

Some sociologists are fond of describing these functions today as "residual" or "inauthentic." To these sociologists, all primordial or prerationalities are considered unenlightened and reactionary. If a man is religious, he is not to be trusted; more, he is to be mistrusted, as someone living in a superstitious and narrow-minded backwater of social evolution. This seems to be a rather arrogant attitude, especially considering that through the influence of modern civilization, man appears to have "progressed" from physical to spiritual starvation.

If we are to regain some of the certainties of our life, we must understand and incorporate the most universal and worthy ideas of our past into our present existence.

Woodrow Wilson expressed this well in his last writing before he died. He warned the American people that their society, unless it was redeemed by being permeated with the spirit of Christ, could not survive. This meant a social and economic order based on "sympathy and helpfulness and a willingness to forgo self-interest in order to promote the welfare, happiness, and contentment of others and of the community as a whole."

It makes little difference what particular religion a man follows. The important thing is that he live up to its precepts. More and more as I grow older, I comprehend there are certain basics in life to which a man must adhere.

MORALS AND ETHICS

There is abundant evidence around us for one to conclude that morals and ethics are becoming less prevalent in peoples' lives. The standards of conduct which lay deeply buried in accepted thought for centuries are no longer absolute. People seem unable to differentiate between physical relief and moral satisfaction. Many confuse material success in life with virtue.

The decline in morals parallels the decline of traditional religion in all areas of our society. In our desire to separate church and state, we have gone to the opposite extreme and have excised religious training from our public schools and colleges, thus depriving our youth of the lasting standards of morals and ethics as enunciated by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.

Morals are the quarrel we have with behavior. Yet, any system of

education which does not inculcate moral values simply furnishes the intellectual equipment whereby men and woman can better satisfy their pride, greed, and lust.

We are now living on the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion. It is running out, and we have no other consensus of values to take its place. This is partly so because man can now obtain on earth what previously was promised him when he reached heaven.

In our system of society, no authority exists to tell us what is good and desirable. We are each free to seek what we think is good in our own way.

We should all think about what is the basis for a consensus of values in our society. Where do our goals and values come from? If we believe in a free society, what limitations, if any, are we willing to place on that freedom so that society may protect and maintain itself?

"A REVOLT AGAINST RESTRAINT"

If there is anything the matter with the Navy, in these days when the favorite indoor sport is to assail the armed forces, it is a tendency on the part of a few to drift into a lack of reverence for the old-time qualities of duty, loyalty and discipline. Following the trend of the times, when many who are unable to build shacks are tearing down cathedrals, there are those in and out of the service, for reasons best known to themselves, who are engaged in hurling epithets, attacking policies, ridiculing methods, and generally weakening the lawful authority of and lessening the respect due to their superior officers. These practices are especially dangerous at the present time when the world, seeking so-called new freedom, is in revolt against restraint of every kind.

EDITORS NOTE: The paragraph immediately above was written by Rear Admiral George R. Clark, U.S. Navy (retired) and was published in the Proceedings in November 1927. Admiral Clark's nearly half-century-old thoughts give added meaning to Admiral Rickover's advice: "I would urge a more sympathetic understanding of the past...In all areas of man's existence, the present is the fruit of the past and the seed of the future."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The late Admiral Rickover was born in 1900, commissioned in 1922, and holds a B.S. from the U.S. Naval Academy and an M.S. in electrical engineering. He qualified in submarines in 1931. In 1946, he was assigned to the atomic submarine project with the Atomic Energy Commission and has been involved in nuclear propulsion within the Navy since then. He attained rank of admiral in 1973