editorially speaking

A Philosopher's Stone for the 20th Century

Although the speed and momentum of our work tends to sweep us along in currents of doing—doing more, doing it now, doing it efficiently, and although the excitement we experience and the scenery we view as we move tend to buoy up our spirits and occupy our thoughts, there is something less than satisfying about it all. Somewhere deep inside us is a still small voice shooting questions like tiny darts at our sense of well being. None of these questions is more discomforting than: What is the [higher] value of what I am doing? or Am I giving the best that's in me?

Granted that such questions are at least as hard to answer now as at any time on record, and granted that some great contributors appear never to have bothered to ask them, even the process of struggling for answers might add a measure of satisfaction.

The value of an effort or activity is, of course, highly subjective and culturally dependent. Also, very few of us are formulators of original ideas. About all we can hope to do is to be carriers, interpreters and appliers of the great ideas of others, making it possible for more to know and to benefit from these ideas than otherwise might be possible. If this is not the highest calling, it certainly has the potential for being among the most valuable. Just how valuable depends, of course, on how well what we do correlates with the higher value systems of the culture. All of us are familiar with these higher value systems, but in the press and turmoil of our assembly-line work style, they tend to lose their relevancy and sometimes even their meaning. After a time, darts of doubt start flying inside us, and, finding no satisfaction elsewhere, we look for a source of inner strength—something with enough substance for us to depend on and trust. It is then that a review of basic value systems can be helpful.

Such a review might begin by considering briefly the origins of our higher values and the conditions that led to their acceptance. It also might deal with the question: What is the structure of a life of value? As examples of sources of higher values, we might consider the themes of Socrates, the teachings of Christ, the lessons of Thoreau at Walden and the life-enriching contributions of science.

Socrates grew up in an open, informed society whose life-force was dialogue and discussion. He deserted an early interest in natural sciences to devote his amazing energy to human problems such as the right life for man and how best to live it. Unlike most others of his time, he was in continual touch with and he shared the interests of the ordinary man. From him we learned the value of seeing things as they are and of following the argument where it leads.

Christ lived in a closed society in the midst of corruption and injustice and among the less literate and most oppressed of its populace. Like Socrates, he dealt with human problems and with the ordinary person. He taught us to value the humanity and substance in ourselves and in one another, and to rise above adversity.

Thoreau came out of our own pluralistic, opportunity-laden, humanism-deflating milieu. He taught us that even in the midst of the maddening ordeal, and even as we work with simple tools, doing ordinary jobs—such as building a house with nails, hammer and wood—we can create for ourselves a large and fulfilling view of life.

Workers in the natural sciences, while not dealing directly with human problems in many cases, have given us not only knowledge and skills for handling such problems, but they have refined our appreciation of the nature and role of mankind. From the sciences we have learned to value human life more than ever, and to create conditions in which an ever-increasing fraction of the people of the earth can live richer and fuller lives.

The large scale acceptance of these value systems at the time they were first put forth was not much more extensive than it would be if the unrecognized Socrates, Christ, Thoreau or Pasteur were to present them today as national television series in the context and idiom of our time. What then gained them their widespread acceptance?

Three features common to all these systems undoubtedly were important in their acceptance:

—*their absolute integrity*—the fact that they speak simply, purely and functionally to basic human needs in ways that are believable to even the unsophisticated mind.
—*their trenchance in defining an alternative*—the fact that they offer an unmistakably clear and appealing, but sometimes uncomfortable option, one that can be tested, debated and explained.
—*their effectiveness in attracting spokesmen*—the fact that they function as great generative forces, bringing out the moral enthusiasm of the strong and the weak.

Perhaps it is too simplistic to suggest that an appreciation of the sources of major value systems and the conditions for their acceptance can help us assess the value of what we do, or aid us in rediscovering a spring of moral strength that can heighten the satisfaction we derive from our work. Yet, for those who search in earnest for this 20th century philosopher's stone, reasonable first questions might be: Does what I do have integrity? Does it speak simply, purely and functionally to basic human needs? Does it offer better alternatives to existing ills? Is it important enough to generate interest beyond my horizons?

Having a mechanism for relating what we do to higher value systems undoubtedly will bolster the satisfaction and renew the confidence of many. Others will continue to search for something more, perhaps even for structural features that characterize a life of value.

Some good minds have contemplated the structure of such a life; most agree that among its essential features are knowing, believing and giving. Of knowing, we would appear to have been given opportunities and experience in abundance. Of believing, we might benefit from a reminder that without some system of beliefs we are without a source of the great generative and creative forces that enable us to grow and learn and be. Of giving, we might think on the proposition that the ultimate need of all humans is to test themselves against life until they have exhausted the capacities that are in them.

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