

PUTTING GREATNESS TO THE TEST

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GLEANINGS FROM THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Chapters 9 & 10, composite

Jesus and his disciples came to Capernaum and when he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you discussing among yourselves on the way here?"

But they were silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve to him, and he said to them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them. And then, taking him in his arms he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me..."

The next day they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them... And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

And Jesus said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?"

And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one on your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

But Jesus said to them... "to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

And when the other disciples heard what James and John had said, they were indignant. And Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve."

THE MEASURE OF A WOMAN

Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist*

In 1897 Susan B. Anthony looked back over a half-century of women's "evolution" and recorded their progress. She found that "the close of this 19th century finds every

trade, vocation and profession open to women, and every opportunity at their command for preparing themselves to follow these occupations...

"Woman is no longer compelled to marry for support, but may herself make her home and earn her own financial independence... With but few exceptions, the highest institutions of learning in the land are as freely open to girls as to boys. There has been a radical revolution in the legal status of women...and the old common law has been annulled by legislative enactment."

What Susan B. Anthony identified as gains for women, when measured against women's previous condition, seemed to be enormous strides.

In these later years of her life, Anthony remembered the days when she, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and some others had been among the few women in the nation who had dared publicly to demand vital rights for their sex: property rights for married women; coeducation; opening of the professions, trades and unions to women; equal pay and, of course, suffrage...

And so, by the end of the century, Susan B. Anthony had passed from being the leader of the movement for women's rights to being a symbol of women's craving for total emancipation.

** REFLECTIONS **

In the selection from the Gospel of Mark excerpted above, Jesus provided his own perspective on the matter of human greatness, to wit, "he who would be first must be last".

Shortly after the turn of the millennium, *Time Magazine* offered an opinion of its own when it compiled a list of the one-hundred "greatest" men and women of the previous century. From that list several were selected who stood above the rest. Perhaps you will recall who ultimately won the title of the 20th century's most estimable figure: not a military hero, a political leader, or a spiritual and ethical exemplar, but a theoretical physicist - Albert Einstein.

The choice surprised many people, but it had some merit. The special and general theories of relativity constituted a major break-through, laid the groundwork for the nuclear age and won Einstein the highest plaudits from his peers. **Paul Dirac** called general relativity "possibly the greatest scientific discovery ever made" and **Max Born** termed it "the greatest feat of human thinking about

nature, the most amazing combination of philosophical penetration, physical intuition and mathematical skill."

Einstein was 26 years old and still working as a humble patent clerk in Bern, Switzerland when he burst upon the scene with his first original insights. Over the next ten years he worked out the details of his general theory of relativity. After 1915, however, Einstein never again made a significant contribution to theoretical physics. He struggled for decades to develop a unified field theory but was never successful. This is a man who enjoyed a brilliant ten year career, but for the next forty accomplished little that was noteworthy. Does he therefore deserve the accolade *Time Magazine* bestowed upon him?

On the basis of his scientific discoveries alone, perhaps. But Einstein wasn't just a physicist. **Benjamin Franklin** once said that "There never was yet a truly great man that was not at the same time truly virtuous." By that standard, Einstein surely qualifies as a great spirit. Although by the 1930's he had been surpassed by a new generation of physicists, Einstein built a humanitarian edifice upon the foundation of his scientific fame. Ultimately, he was as admired for his kindness and sociability as for his genius. "To Americans of my generation," **John Updike** writes, "Einstein was as endearing as Charlie Chaplain and as saintly as Mahatma Gandhi."

And Gandhi, by the way was runner-up to Einstein in *Time's* assessment of 20th century "greatness".

That magazine's attempt to catalogue and to rank recent history's most important figures reflects a school of thought that treats history as the product of the brilliant insights and brave deeds of autonomous individuals. The signal achievements of exceptional men and women are what matter most in the ongoing saga of human civilization.

And this is, after all, a rather pleasant idea. Humans are not the mere playthings of powerful and inexorable outside forces. We are neither wholly determined by our genes nor enslaved by our animal instincts. Men and women have the capacity to rise higher -- to define themselves, to re-shape their environment and fulfill a higher purpose. The heroes memorialized in song and story give us something to aspire to; they help invest life with tangible meaning.

Is it not inspiring to think that, as individuals, we can transcend the conditions under which we live and labor? The final stanza of Hymn number 304 in *Singing the Living Tradition* addresses that question and answers it with a resounding "yes!"

From deed to dream, from dream to deed,
From daring hope to hope;
The restless wish, the instant need
Still drives us up the slope.
Sing we no governed firmament, cold, ordered, regular
We sing the stinging discontent
That leaps from star to star.

There is, of course, another way of looking at the drama of human development. Some have argued that instead of focusing on the people standing in the foreground of history's grand canvass, we ought to pay closer attention to what's going on in the background. Those heroic individuals who grab all the headlines are not really the shapers of, but for the most part are shaped by their milieu. This was the conclusion German philosopher **Georg Hegel** arrived at, and it was powerfully presented by **Leo Tolstoi** in his epic novel *War and Peace*. **Tolstoi** depicted his characters - including Napoleon Bonaparte - as subject to titanic forces they could not begin to fathom, much less control. The complex interplay of countless variables determines the fate of an Alexander, a Caesar, a Genghis Khan, a Napoleon or a Hitler. "Kings are the slaves of history," **Tolstoi** wrote,

...and the unconscious swarmlike life of humankind uses every moment of a king's life as an instrument for its purposes."

Even the revelatory insights of a precocious thinker like Einstein were the product of a particular set of unique circumstances. Einstein was an unusually gifted theoretician and visionary, but he was not the world's best mathematician. Fortunately, he came of age at a time when the field of mathematics was advancing rapidly. For general relativity in particular, Einstein had to look to others for the proofs that would make his theory credible.

Einstein belonged to a community of powerful thinkers who benefited immensely from each other's work. Scientists are probably more aware than most of their interdependence and may be less prone to ascribe "greatness" to particular individuals. And yet the general public seems all too eager to inflate certain men and women to heroic proportions, discounting the critical role communities and popular movements play in creating and shaping civilizations.

While it is appropriate to celebrate the outstanding achievements of the gifted few, lifting them up can have the effect of putting us down. "If you over-estimate great men," **Lao Tse** warned, "people become powerless." Without diminishing what an Einstein or a Gandhi accomplished, we are wise to keep in mind that greatness is as much a gift of fate as it is an earned honor. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, a fortuitous combination of forces is typically required to produce a hero.

Lord William Wilberforce - the subject of the recent movie *Amazing Grace* - is a case in point. Although little known in this country, **Wilberforce** is a household word in Great Britain and is admired for his saintly attributes and political courage. Popular histories give him credit for ending England's involvement with slavery and the slave trade. For three decades in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, **Wilberforce** argued tirelessly and vociferously for abolition. When the House of Commons finally did abolish slavery in 1807, its members gave their stubborn, triumphant colleague a rare standing ovation.

Amazing Grace presents **Lord William** as not only an eloquent advocate for a just cause, but as a man of great sensitivity, moral probity and religious piety. He was, in other words, not only an exceptionally determined legislator, but thoroughly imbued with the spirit of justice and compassion - a true giant in a land of moral Lilliputians.

Unfortunately, in its eagerness to portray **Lord William** in the best possible light, what the movie overlooks is that Great Britain was, in the late 1700's, a hot-bed of anti-slavery sentiment. **Wilberforce** was no lone prophet crying in the wilderness, and he was less the fomenter of a revolution than a fellow-traveler in it.

Behind the aristocratic, Anglican-bred **Wilberforce** an army of grass-roots activists - many of them middle- and working-class Quakers - were establishing anti-slavery societies, publishing pamphlets and organizing boycotts. The largest consumer revolt the world had ever seen occurred in 1792, when over 300,000 Britains refused to buy slave-produced West Indian sugar. During this period, organizational and protest strategies were developed that have since been used by human rights groups across the planet. It was a time of great moral energy and original thinking.

Without this "community of resistance" **William Wilberforce's** appeals to Parliament would likely have fallen on deaf ears. Across the Atlantic in the United

States even the most articulate abolitionists in Congress - **Senator William Sumner** for instance - were routinely rebuffed. It took a civil war to achieve in this country what effective community organizing and economic pressure accomplished in Great Britain a half-century earlier.

In the annals of American history, **Susan B. Anthony** occupies a position somewhat comparable to **William Wilberforce** in that she is often credited with leading the charge for women's rights. That **Anthony's** was the first female image to appear on a piece of U.S. currency - the non-historical Lady Liberty doesn't count - underscores the high regard in which she is held.

Anthony was indisputably a superb organizer, a courageous crusader, a daring agitator eager to go to jail to prove a point. She was an effective orator and also a pragmatic politician - qualities which commend her to us.

But for most of her career **Susan B. Anthony** was but one member of an unusually effective two-party team. Without the powerful prose of **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**, **Anthony** would have been far less persuasive. **Stanton** quite literally put words in **Anthony's** mouth. Her prolific pen produced not only speeches, but eulogies, letters, resolutions and convention calls. Late in life, **Anthony** admitted that she would never be able to publish a collection of her own speeches, because they had all been written by **Stanton**. **Stanton** was not an organizer; **Anthony** was not a wordsmith. It could well be argued that neither of these women by themselves was truly "great." Rather, the cause of women's rights spawned a powerful and fortuitous collaboration.

Nevertheless, under the right circumstances an individual with the right temperament and requisite abilities can be said to achieve greatness. In times of emergency, for instance, certain people are assigned onerous responsibilities and they bear them with almost super-human strength. Men like Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt and Nelson Mandela proved to be such gifted leaders that they deserve to be crowned with glory. Winston Churchill also belongs among that select company because, **Isaiah Berlin** writes:

He created a heroic mood and turned the fortunes of the Battle of Britain...by imposing his imagination and his will upon his countrymen... He appeared to them larger and nobler than life and lifted them to an abnormal height in a moment of crisis... It was his unique and unforgettable achievement that he created this necessary illusion within the framework of a free

system without destroying or even twisting it; that he called forth spirits which did not stay to oppress and enslave the population after the hour of need had passed.

Most of the discussion thus far has treated "greatness" as a title bestowed upon rare individuals who, in some significant way, affected the course of history. They made a contribution recognized by society as unusually noteworthy. Some, like the sanguine **William Wilberforce** helped legitimate a powerful, broad-based reform movement. Others, like the melancholy **Lincoln**, felt the weight of an entire country resting on their frail shoulders yet remained steadfast.

But does this exhaust all possible meanings of the word "greatness?" What about this comment by the English novelist **Dinah Maria Mulock**. "The person who does his or her work, any work, conscientiously, must always be, in one sense, great."

In other words, greatness can have both a personal and a public application. At the personal level, it consists in faithfully and effectively serving a vocation - whether that be medicine or mothering, ministry or military service, carpentry or accounting. In wedding ourselves to a vocation, the object is not to achieve public greatness, but to render service in a way that delivers maximum personal fulfillment. This is the style of greatness **Lao Tse** commends in *The Tao Te Ching*:

He who stands on tiptoe doesn't stand firm. He who rushes ahead doesn't go far. He who tries to shine dims his own light... If you want to be in accord with the Tao, just do your job, then let go.

I recently ran across an article about **Roger Tory Peterson**, the author of a well known series of field guides to North American birds. The author, **John Terborgh**, credits **Peterson** with heightening America's appreciation for wildlife and alerting us to the adverse affect human activities have on the natural world. "This is a man who had done more than any other" to alter our attitude towards nature, the author concludes.

For his own part, however, **Roger Tory Peterson** never sought the lime-light, never aspired to a position of leadership or cultural influence. His passion was the study and illustration of birds and beckoning others to

experience that same passion. "I met him as a teenage birdwatcher near Washington, D.C.," **Terborgh** writes,

...and was thrilled to accompany him a few times when he led small groups along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal... Attentive both to the birds singing around us and to the members of our group, he responded to each question with a patience and kindness that relieved the anxiety of those who held him in awe.

Given this description, I suspect **Peterson** was the sort of man who would have felt good about himself regardless of what public opinion made of him. He knew what he needed to do. He did it exceptionally well. He didn't try to outshine others and thus effortlessly maintained his humanity. We could do far worse than to emulate, each in our own unique way, that less spectacular but no less valid expression of greatness.