

For Self-Examination

Ken Olson

Someone, somewhere, said that there are two things that a person should do for oneself, even if they are done badly: blow your own nose and write your own love letters. True enough. Along the same lines, we pay many people to do many things for us, but periodically “taking stock” of one’s own life cannot be outsourced. “To thy own self be true:” so wrote Shakespeare in Hamlet, and Socrates said, “Know thyself” because no one else can.

It’s interesting that if you are born an ape or an alligator, a tiger or a turtle, a cow or a canary, you can’t really fail at that identity, because nearly everything is determined by genes. With us, it’s different, for human nature is complex and includes free will and conscience. We even speak of having found or having missed our calling, and, while we can’t always choose what happens to us, we can decide how we respond. We have not simply a nature but a history: how we have used our mental and emotional capacities shapes who we are.

Thus, among life’s huge tragedies is that of dying while still a stranger to oneself. Thoreau writes in Walden, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” There are all sorts of things that get in the way of that foremost task of becoming all we were meant to be, which is an authentic self. Later on, he observes, “In proportion as our inner life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while.” The syndrome is easily modernized by referencing computers and cell phones. If the trend continues, separating us from our devices will require amputation.

Of course, there have always been distractions from a person’s central task. The oldest known written language is that of the ancient culture of Sumer in the Tigris Euphrates River valleys of the Middle East. There, in the form of a clay tablet some 5,000 years old, scholars discovered a Sumerian letter from a father to his son that has been translated to read: “Night and day you waste in pleasure. You have accumulated much wealth; you have expanded far and wide, have become big, broad, powerful and puffed up, but you looked not to your humanity.” It could have been written yesterday.

We are given many instructions for making a living but very few for making a life. In any case, self-examination, as the phrase indicates, is a do-it-yourself project, the most important one. And for anyone who imagines that this topic is “academic,” too philosophical, does not pertain to them, etc., the fact is that, over time, absolutely everyone does develop a so-called philosophy of life. The only questions are whether we are aware of it and whether it is good or bad. A poem by R. L. Sharpe from 1890: “Isn’t it strange that princes and kings And clowns that caper In sawdust rings / And common people Like you and me Are builders for eternity? / Each is given a bag of tools, A shapeless mass, a book of rules; / And each must make, ere life is flown, A stumbling block or a steppingstone.”

An old maxim is that spending more time sharpening the ax results in less time spent chopping wood. This is the case with employing the gift of reason to one's inner self to discover what is real --whether or not we like what we find. Thomas Huxley was the great 19th century English physician, educator, and friend of Darwin who fought against many popular but erroneous preconceived ideas. We see his spirit in a letter to a like-minded clergy friend in which he wrote, "The longer I live the more obvious it is to me that the most sacred act of a man's life is to say and to feel, 'I believe such and such to be true.' All the greatest rewards and all the greatest penalties of existence cling about that act."

Thus, it's a grave mistake to allow anyone else to determine for us what is true and false, whether that is an ignorant and immoral president, ill-educated but pontificating preachers, or propagandists posing as podcasters and news anchors. It's our lives, our business, our own high calling as human beings.

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