

HUMAN SOLIDARITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In an 1892 address given in London at the close of the European Theosophical Society convention, William Quan Judge stated: “Our duty is to recognize the great human soul with which we have to deal and for which we should work. Its progress, its experience, its inner life, are vastly more important than all our boasted civilization.” [1] Similarly, H.P. Blavatsky presented a vision, and a promise in *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), when she said that it would someday be possible for us to live in a society wherein selfishness, indifference and brutality would not be the norm of the state of the race. Mankind could create a society wherein “each shall live for all and all for each.” [2]

What does it mean for “each to live for all and all for each”? One thing we could say with certainty is that each would live a life of social responsibility. “Responsibility” is a word rich in meanings. Foremost, it means to be answerable for one’s conduct, to keep up one’s obligations, to be morally and mentally accountable, to be a prime agent, and a free moral being. To be responsible also means to hold a duty or trust. H.P. Blavatsky and William Quan Judge gave extraordinary teachings on the concept of duty. In *The Key to Theosophy*, HPB describes duty as what is “due to humanity.” That humanity includes all human beings, members of all communities, one’s neighbors, one’s family, and especially the poorest and those who are the most helpless and vulnerable.

H.P.B. also warned that if we choose to ignore or don’t accept this duty, we become in debt. In fact, we may become morally bankrupt, possibly carrying that moral bankruptcy into our next life. Moral bankruptcy can be recognized by contrast with the teaching of the Four Golden Links, Universal Unity and Causation, Human Solidarity, Karma, and Reincarnation. These links “bind humanity into one family, one universal Brotherhood.” [3]

Human Solidarity is implied by the metaphysical links of Universal Unity and Causation. All human beings share the same source and potential of a “Higher Self” that reflects the light and ideation of this primordial unity. The metaphysical substratum of the cosmos is the universal law of action or ‘karma,’ cosmic law. The primary cosmic law is compassion, the “law of laws.” As human beings we understand karma as the process of moral rebalancing, and we experience the results of our actions as part of the law of compassion. We have ample opportunity to learn from karma because of reincarnation. Fulfilling duty, then, is a responsibility that goes beyond one life, involves many lives, and in fact never ends. There is both public and private duty in each person’s life.

If duty is what is due to humanity, what specifically is it that is due? HPB gave a very simple and straightforward answer—equal rights and privileges for all. How do we achieve this? Again, she gave us one simple answer: that we should endeavor to act for all first and for ourselves, last. If we were to act upon the Theosophical principle that HPB describes in *The Key* section entitled “Practical Theosophy”, we should work for all with authentic self-sacrifice. [4] We should support social cooperation and social betterment. We should work for and serve those ideas, those principles, and those goals throughout our lives.

If we ask how to define and support equal rights and privileges for all, we should recognize that there are fundamental needs which HPB refers to as physiological laws. There are many in society who are suffering from lack of enough resources to ‘keep the body and soul together.’ There can be no ethical flourishing or progressive development in society when people are too hungry and too poor to seek change. Helping at this level of human and social necessity

echoes the ancient Hindu concept and practice of *antyo daya*, meaning that humanitarians must support first, the last and the lowest, the poorest members of society.

HPB pointed out that historically, in many eras, traditions of despotism and virtual slavery of subjects led to consequent widespread inertia and inactivity. Whereas a reasoned appeal for equal rights and equal privileges for all was at the heart of HPB's effort to reach out to all of humanity regardless of gender, caste, religion or color. This duty was fundamentally important and ground-breaking for all of the Founders of the Theosophical Movement and later for many students of Theosophy.

W. Q. Judge looked to Theosophists to present ideas to the broadest spectrum of humanity possible, especially to the common people. He encouraged students to bring the ideas of Theosophy to the rich and the poor, in ways that they could understand. For the lower classes who experienced more oppression, more physical and psychological degradation, he advised one to be particularly concerned to give intelligent explanations for what might be seen as the injustices of life. His observation on the political scene, on mass political and reform movements, was that there was a tendency for demagoguery to foment anger amongst the lower classes rather than an understanding that would give them a clear notion of who they truly were and how they might effectively improve their quality of life.

H. P. Blavatsky pointed out in *The Key* that it is important to work to influence public opinion about what is due to all in society. Recognition of what is justly due to all is universally understood. There is already a great tradition, she noted, among the common peoples of the world: that of the heroic ethic. In many simpler, older societies this heroic tradition was very much understood and appreciated. She noted this universality:

“What you call Christian duties were inculcated by every great moral and religious reformer ages before the Christian Era. All that was great, generous, heroic was in days of old not only talked about and preached from pulpits as in our own time, but acted upon, sometimes by whole nations. The history of Buddhist Reform is full of the most noble and most heroically unselfish acts. ‘Be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another; love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous; not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing; but contrariwise blessing’ was practically carried out by the followers of Buddha several centuries before Peter.” [5]

Mr. Judge reminds us in his writings that reforms have long been on the mind of the modern Western public, especially with the intense, adverse impact of industrialization and urbanization in the late 19th century. Yet many times what is really being addressed by these proposed reforms is merely the physical aspect of human life. He asked, what about the inner man? Should he be left without a guide? Reforms can go nowhere after a while if the needs of the inner man are not addressed. The true creator and true doer uses the higher principles of the mind and ethical discernment. Reforms have come and gone, but many are not what we might call today “sustainable” because they do not awaken and engage these higher principles nor delve into the root of the fundamental problems of society caused by inner turmoil, ignorance or corruption.

Reform at a higher level would address two of the great problems of social activists: the materialistic viewpoint of science and the dogmatic standpoint of religion. No religious fear of hellfire, no grand promise of legislation, and no particular reform however scientifically designed will get at the root of the problems of society without true education, and further, without keeping alive vital ethical values. By a true religious viewpoint, Judge was referring to

the common morality, the true ethical essence, of all religions as well as the teachings of morality that were brought forth by the Theosophical Movement.

H. P. Blavatsky and W. Q. Judge clarified for Theosophists what would be a member's best response on questions about reform or politics. Their answers to questions that they received from the public and newspapers are interesting in that they show the deep respect that the Theosophical Founders had for the notion of tolerance. Individuals and governments could take stands on particular reforms; Theosophists would not. When speaking about reform Judge explained the careful thought behind the formation of the original Theosophical Society in New York City. The Founders were deliberate in allowing for a free platform of ideas and free discussion among the diverse individuals who came together. Individuals would not be treated from a sectarian point of view. There could be contentious discussions and arguments, but the primary aim was to make everyone feel that they had a free opportunity to contribute to a vital, mutual understanding of Theosophical duty.

There is also a remarkable, very striking critique from Mr. Judge about the major "isms" of the time. In his article, "Religion and Reform From a Theosophical Viewpoint," he spoke of nationalism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism, communism, anarchism, and of the movement for universal suffrage. In the end, all of these "isms" fall short Judge concludes. For instance, in communist societies, there could emerge protection for individual rights and protection of property but with no guarantee that leaders would authentically sustain those protections. Similarly, HPB was encouraged by those around her in India who were taking radical stands against child marriage that she would not. The approach for Theosophical Society members instead would be to try to be balanced and reasonable on the subject and try to be helpful in practice.

Is there any higher political viewpoint that is of benefit to humanity? Judge's article on "The Adepts in America in 1776" illustrates the possibility that indeed there are higher ideas that might guide political thinking. Judge mentions the life and work of Thomas Paine as well as that of Freemasons, Washington, Jefferson and Franklin, who were so respectful of non-dogmatic thinking. They worked very hard, with the over brooding help of the Adepts, to protect the developing American Republic from religious dogmatism and sectarianism. Judge mentioned that what was going on in America was being done for all of humanity, with many sacrifices in order to bring about an open, free society. Judge wrote that he was amazed when he looked around the country and felt the energy of Americans, noting that underlying it was an occult energy. He observed that Americans from the lowest to the highest classes were reading newspapers and magazines and demonstrating a great inclination for the debate of ideas. [6] He also spoke of a certain kind of flexibility, a fluidity that was present in order to get things done. The writer D.H. Lawrence once referred to the fluid coming together of the "head, heart and hands" as the basis of effective action. H.P. Blavatsky and Mr. Judge, who worked unendingly to help Theosophists become servants of the rest of humanity did not have a small view of political ideas, just a caution about small politics.

In the article, "The Adepts in America in 1776," Judge cites from Chapter Four of Thomas Paine's book, *The Rights of Man*, wherein Paine had referred to his witnessing that "a new morning of reason arises." Paine was an ardent spokesperson for the value of community as that place where people in society could find their strengths and develop real self-government. By contrast, institutional governments were more apt to become agents of special interests and instruments of coercion. [7] Students of Theosophy may think of this comparison as represented in a message from Buddhist teaching:

“A true community is a place where truth and wisdom are its light and where the people know each other and trust each other and have things in common and where there is a harmonious organization. In fact, harmony is its life and its happiness and its meaning.” [8]

We might contrast the above ideal picture of community with HPB’s clarion call to take notice of the extreme disharmonies of life experienced by masses of humanity in the centers of modern civilization. While in the 1880’s the mega-cities and mega-slums of today had not yet developed, the two periods share similarities in their underlying causes of suffering and underlying attitudes toward human life. Whitechapel’s great disparities in comforts of life between the suffering of its slum dwellers and the privileges enjoyed by the higher classes of London were HPB’s proof for a critique of the urban, industrialized cities of the West. The gap was indicative of the deceptive glamour, the alienation, and the noticeable corrupting effects of modern civilization. [9]

The karmic legacies of inquisitions, wars, misuse, religious and secular exploitation, and colonialism, were disruptive, but not as significant to H.P.B. in undermining social responsibility as the dominant thought of the time. With great courage, H.P.B. excoriated the influence of restrictive ideas on the rights and privileges of mankind by chastizing the leader of Christendom in England. In her “Letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury” she spoke respectively of the many members of the Christian faith who thought about and expressed intuitive affirmations of the universal needs of humanity. But she also engaged in a full critique of the unbridled materialism and spiritual deficit of the time. She wrote:

“If your Grace, from your high pinnacle, will cast your eyes around, you will behold a Christian civilization in which a frantic and merciless battle of man against man is not only the distinguishing feature, but the acknowledged principle. It is an accepted scientific and economic axiom today that all progress is achieved through the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest; and the fittest to survive in this Christian civilization are not those who are possessed of the qualities that are recognized by the morality of every age to be the best . . .

“. . . When people discard dogma they fancy that they have discarded the religious sentiment also, and they conclude that religion is a superfluity in human life – a rendering to the clouds of things that belong to earth, a waste of energy which could be more profitably expended in the struggle for existence. The materialism of this age is, therefore, the direct consequence of the Christian doctrine that there is no ruling power in the Universe, and no immortal Spirit in man except those made known in Christian dogma. “[10]

In “The New Cycle,” a 1889 article in a French Theosophical publication, HPB observed: “The arid soil upon which the present generation of men is moving, at the close of this age of spiritual dearth and of purely material surfeit, has need of a divine omen above its horizon, a rainbow, as symbol of hope. . . For all those who see the sterility and folly of an existence blinded by materialism and ferociously indifferent to the fate of their neighbor, this is the moment to act: now is the time for them to devote all their energies, all their courage and all their efforts to a great intellectual reform. . . The paths that lead to it are many; but the wisdom is one. Artistic souls envision it, those who suffer dream of it; the pure in heart know it.” [11]

With characteristic enthusiasm and in the spirit of her exposition of the “Golden Links”, HPB explained that progress could come about and humanity could move forward only when the nobler qualities of the soul are developed. In the language of “The New Cycle”, this would mean that Theosophists would be the friends of humanity, and they would become inspired learners with the help of science learning the fundamental capacities of Nature and high potential of humanity.

This bold message of social responsibility by the Founders of the modern Theosophical movement influenced many who sought reform in late 19th century America. Edward Bellamy’s Utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, inspired hundreds of reform minded citizens including large numbers of Theosophists to found Nationalist clubs. These clubs drew thousands who endorsed ideas of equality, social cooperation, true democracy and economic justice. Proposals to implement these ideas through political reforms and fresh public policy electrified civic minded citizens throughout the nation. Many young adults fresh out of college were inspired to move into the slums of cities and use social science data to shape what came to be called progressive reform. Hull House in Chicago founded by Jane Addams and the Henry Street Settlement in New York City founded by Lillian Wald are the best known. In her famous account of the activities undertaken by Hull House volunteers, Jane Addams explained the concept of subjective necessity that motivated these new social activists. Every human being has within, she claimed, a desire to help others and contribute to the common good of a community. In young people this desire is particularly strong. Thus, to make a sacrifice of living in a slum and getting to know directly slum dwellers and their appalling living conditions, activists experienced a flow of empathy from within their soul and developed a creativity for finding solutions to social problems.

One lesson learned early by Jane Addams and her workers is that they should not impose on those they were trying to help programs that reflected middle class values such as learning classical art history. They discovered that mothers wanted to learn nutritional information to improve their babies’ health and to learn English so as to reduce their extreme isolation that older, female immigrants experienced. Young men and women wanted to learn the skills and acquire the clothing needed to gain employment in middle class jobs in the downtown commercial centers. They also wanted a place for social and recreational activities that matched those of other young Americans such as basketball, pop music and dancing. Most importantly, these recipients of social services needed to gain confidence both within themselves and in public space where they could feel part of the new modern America. The social activists came to see that these young people could be trained to join in the reform movement and in time become leaders in their own community which many of them did. As a result of the interaction between the “outside” volunteers and the slum residents, feelings of mutual respect and trust replaced the sociological gap fed by class consciousness. Thereby the subjective necessity to serve blossomed, and the instruction of H.P.B. that each should work for all was fulfilled significantly. Each could join in the mighty struggle to turn progressive proposals into enacted legislation approved by local, state and federal agencies. Each could become part of a nucleus of universal brotherhood.

The list of accomplishments in this the most successful reform movement in American history shows how a foundation for contemporary social values and methods for political reform was built. Restrictions on child labor, protections in the workplace, safety regulations for food and drugs, sanitation for slum housing, expanded educational opportunities and new methods for political democracy such as the initiative, referendum, recall, election primaries and women’s

suffrage transformed the goals of American politics. H.P. B.'s call for "equal rights and privileges" has been significantly turned into a contemporary reality although the failures or incomplete's are obvious. Two candidates for the American Presidency now call themselves "progressive" and move toward a revived and more transparent political agenda. Amazement at the dynamic change in issues debated fervently during the recent six months may only be converted into effective action if we can recognize those bold thoughts that Tom Paine observed bursting into his mind and draw down that occult energy that Mr. Judge spoke of. The challenge remains; the questions persist. How may the beacon light of social responsibility penetrate and expand the vitalizing consciousness of all so that the needs of all human beings and life forms are seen and felt? How do we transform contemporary culture into one that supports the emergence of men and women motivated by an authentic desire to help others? How do we learn how to be exemplars of social responsibility by attending to both the inner, moral and spiritual needs as well as the outer, material necessities for a decent and equitable quality of life? To try, ever keep trying, to help others using the teaching of Theosophy and well considered "experiments in truth" can open the doors of discovery and reveal pathways toward social responsibility.

References

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