

The Making of Reality

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The function of human personality, which gives to human life its most profound significance, is that of making reality. Whether we so wish it or not, the fact remains that the thoughts we think, and the conduct that expresses those thoughts goes to constitute the reality in the midst of which we live. I am an architect, utilizing the knowledge of the past, and giving play to my own capacity to draw the plans of a great building, work together with all those who assist in making the building. We become the makers of a reality which expresses an ideal in conformity with the essential laws of building, the building has become a new part of the real environment in which we live. Before we, who have made [it] began our work, it did not exist, except that the material from which it was constructed existed in the raw state as nature furnishes it. Henceforth, the building exists as an apparent reality to influence the conditions and the development of human life. It is easy to see how thought and conduct work together here to express our thought ideals, and to change and modify reality as we will. In ways less apparent, but none the less certain and influential, the dynamic power of our thought life is constantly discharging itself into the midst of the environment, physical, moral and spiritual, it is registering itself as a permanent part of the world in which we live, and in which our children are to live. The environment, whether physical or intellectual, modifies and influences our personalities. In turn, we react upon the environment, modifying or changing the world in which we live so that it tends to represent the ideal that we cherish within. It is particularly true that the iniquities of the fathers are visited upon their children even unto the third and fourth generation, or even longer, so also is it true that the good of the fathers is visited upon their children even unto the third and fourth generation and longer. We, who live today, are the beneficiaries of the good, both intentional and unintentional,

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done by the generations who have lived before, and also, we are the victims of the evil, both deliberate and accidental, perpetrated by the past. No man liveth unto himself alone. There is a natural and inevitable interdependence that binds us together in the relationships of life. We are the makers, and in part the creators, of the reality in the midst of which we live. That gives to life its supreme significance.

Now there are two ways of meeting this function of life, and responding to the responsibility that is involved in it. Both ways are present in society today, and have always been present. They appear in big people and little people, among the good and the bad.

One way is illustrated in the dramatic tragedy of Stephen Phillips, *Herod*.² Herod was the king of Judea in the days when Jesus was born at Nazareth. He was a man of power and ability, a strong and uncompromising ruler, whose rule and sway was dedicated to the idea of the obedience of subjects to the master, as the obedience of slaves to the owner. He gained and maintained his position by the iron hand, not hesitating even to demand the death of children, or to kill his wife's dearest brother if he thought these methods would further his ends.

Yet there was in his nature, as it is depicted by Phillips in this powerful drama, a strain of pure and undefiled love for his wife, Mariamne. In the midst of his most glorious achievements, when messengers were hastening from the imperial city with expressions of Caesar's favor, and the news of the extension of his rule, this great Herod, honored by all the great rulers, is losing his mind because, in killing the brother of his wife, he has killed the love that she once had for him. Herod, at whose feet the fawning multitude have just bowed down, now prostrated before his wife, Mariamne, thus addressing her:

I forgive the love denied:
See—I forgive the poison. I but crawl
Here at your feet, and kiss your garments' hem,
And I forgive this mutiny—all—all—
But for one kiss from you, one touch, one word.
O like a creature, I implore some look,
Some syllable, some sign, ere I go mad.

² Stephen Phillips (1864-1915) English poet and dramatist and author of, *Herod: A Tragedy*, London: John Lane, 1901.

Mariamne! Mariamne! Mariamne!

[Mariamne goes out without saying a word or looking round.]

[Throwing himself on steps.]

I am denied her soul, and that which was
A glow hath now become a wasting flame.
I am a barren, solitary pyre!³

Here, just at the moment of his life when the only person in the world whom he loved and cared for was passing up the stairs out of his life forever, there enters the messengers from Rome, bringing the news of his appointment for which he had been working for years that he might at some happy moment bring them to [the] feet of Mariamne, his queen, as an evidence of his love for her, and the worth of himself as lover and husband. Now they are but stinging reminders of their worthlessness, barren symbols of the life and the love that he has sacrificed upon the altar of that most vicious of our gods, the god, man or superman, that believes human beings and human life exist for the purpose of paying tribute to their vicious or chaste desires.

That he might win honor and power to bring it to the feet of Mariamne, Herod had deliberately entered upon the policy of using all means, lawful or unlawful, which would bring about that end. The end he attained, but in attaining it he had destroyed it. The whole tragedy of the drama, and the tragedy of human life, is written in those powerful words which Herod addresses to himself, just as he has committed himself to the first step in the chain of events that was destined to bring him just within the grasp of his cherished dream, and compel him to watch the just and irrevocable nemesis that snatched it from his hungry and grasping clutch.

Dimly I dread lest having struck this blow
Of my freewill, I by this very act
Have signed and pledged me to a second blow
Against my will. What if the powers permit
The doing of that deed which serves us now;
Then of that very deed do make a spur
To drive us to some act that we abhor?
The first step is with us; then all the road,

³ Stephen Phillips, *Herod: A Tragedy*, London: John Lane, 1901, pp. 91-2.

The long road is with Fate. O horrible!
If he being dead demand another death.⁴

Thus it is that we make the reality that in its turn makes us. The thing to which we commit ourselves today of our comparatively freewill pledges us in a large measure to what we shall do tomorrow at the command of the environment which our pledge of today creates.

At about the same time that Herod lived, there lived another man. He did not have power or influence in the affairs of the world. He came of lowly parentage, born in the obscure and despised city of Nazareth, he grew up to be a carpenter, and plied his trade as a man should. He did not have at his command the great power and influence of the Roman Empire. He could not, even had he wished, compel unwilling obedience to his will. So far as the world of power and authority was concerned, he was an outcast, despised and rejected of men. Yet he had that strange subtle power that is stronger than all the armies that any Empire ever organized, or any draconian system of laws that any nation every devised for its protection. He had an idea, rather he had an ideal, a conviction. While Herod and his kind were displaying their great power, this unknown youth was turning over in his mind this ideal of his as he worked at his trade. By and by that force, moral conviction, which the ideal was generating and developing in [the] man, began to show itself. He began to teach, and talk to people about this ideal, and the common people heard him gladly, for he was talking about the great human truths of all mankind. How weak and effeminate, how unimportant to Herod, the man of power and armies, must have appeared this ideal of Jesus, in which it appeared that he who would be greatest among men must be he who serves men the most. How useless to talk of any other force in life other than the force of the iron arm, and any other aim than the aim of the Empire?

Yet this man, with an ideal of a life of love and a world of opportunity, boldly started out alone in the irrepressible conflict between power and authority on the one hand, and truth and righteousness on the other. Time after time the followers of the ideal have betrayed their trust into the hands of power, but

⁴ Stephen Phillips, *Herod: A Tragedy*, London: John Lane, 1901, p. 37.

the ideal still persists. It overthrew the Roman Empire, and it overthrew the Holy Roman Empire, and it is valiantly at work today. Step by step it is pressing forward to the things that are before.

Here we get to the other side of the making of reality. The commitment of ourselves today, of our freewill, to one thought, one act of good will, pledges us to a thought and a deed tomorrow, made the more easy for us because of the pledge of today. That which we do today out of a goodwill tends to create a reality in which goodwill thrives and nourishes. Just because Jesus and hundreds of other men and women have committed themselves to the creating of a reality ordered in goodwill, the permanent reality and environment of life, becomes more a reality in which goodwill appears. It nurtures and fosters goodwill in the life of man.

This is the other way of approaching the possibilities of life. The Herods represent in a large and dramatic way what is going on about us every day in a small way. The Christs represent in a large and dramatic way what is going on about us every day. In the life which we are living we have to make our contribution either to the reality that makes for evil or to the reality that makes for goodwill. As we pledge ourselves in the thought and the conduct of today, so will the reality that we help to create command us tomorrow.

There is always a certain amount of useless and unworthy talk about the question of this man or that man being a Christian. What does the word mean anyway? The followers of Jesus were first called Christians at Antioch, the Book of Acts says. But there is a report of an incident in the life of Jesus that is very interesting. I read it in the scripture lesson. It is the scene at Ceasarea-Phillipi.⁵ When this incident took place, Jesus had been teaching and preaching for some few months. But a short time since he had been preaching to a great multitude, and they heard him gladly for he opened up the avenues of life for them and transformed their hopelessness into hope, and made springs of living water flow from their one-time barren lives. But his teaching, and the following of the common herd, had aroused the suspicions and the opposition of the rulers and the Pharisees. They did not quite like to have their trade interfered with by a

⁵ See Matthew 16:13-17.

man such as Jesus was. This man, dedicated to a great ideal, in a half-amused curious frame of mind, was asking his disciples what the gossips and the busybodies were saying about him and the work that he was doing. Some say that he was Elijah, some that he was John the Baptist, and still others that he might be one of the prophets. Having listened to these opinions, he suddenly becomes serious, and turning to his disciples, to his closest friends, to those who of all others should understand him, asked, "Who say you that I am?" Then the impulsive, enthusiastic Peter answered the question. In answering it he used one of the great words of the Jewish nation, a word which had been used for centuries to characterize such persons as had been called to do a great work for the nation, and the race, a word that had been applied to kings for their services, a word which embodied all the great Jewish ideals of patriotism, a word which for centuries they had hoped to apply still to some great personality, who should come among them and restore them to their former grandeur and place of influence in the life of the nations. Peter the impulsive answered Jesus, saying, "I know who thou art. Thou art the Christ, thou art he who shall be our servant, and in being our servant shall be great among us." They had guessed his secret, the simple carpenter had consecrated himself to his own ideal. Henceforth there should be but one purpose, one aim, one law to which he would pay obedience. He would be the servant of man, he would go in and out among them, bearing witness to the truth, that through his life and the power of his ideal, men might come to see and live a more abundant life. Henceforth he would live not to [be] ministered unto, [but] to be a minister, to make that reality in which all the noble possibilities of human life shall be fostered and nurtured, unto maturity and fruition, to make the world a garden of nobility where manhood and womanhood shall flourish. Such was the secret of Christ, a man called to a great service. Just because he had pledged himself to that service in the quiet of his work as a carpenter, he was able the more easily in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross to still remain true to the ideal of his youth.

Both Jesus and Herod are dead. The one is remembered simply because he happened to be a king of Judea, while the other was dreaming of the ideals of his youth, and dared to think that justice is more powerful than the sword. The one crushed from his life the only bright spot in trying to achieve through injustice. The other, always true to his ideals even to the

point [of] complete renunciation, is still one of the men, perhaps the one man above all others, whom the world honors, loves and cherishes, because he loved his fellow man, and saw in him the spirit of the living God, whom he worshipped in spirit and in truth, because he dedicated his life to the making of that reality which makes for righteousness and peace and happiness in human life.

This day, united in the fellowship of this church, however imperfect and slow it may be in hewn from the rough stones of human experience, the truth shall make a temple of the living God, yet in this deed, done of your own freewill and accord, you dedicate yourself to a life of service in a world in which you live and pledge yourselves to continue to bear witness to the truth, as your life and your experience discloses it to you. In doing that fearlessly and faithfully, you fulfill the great function of human life, that of making reality, and sharing with the great spirit, in the creative process of the world. Even if thou hast stumbled, open thou thy wings.