

The Essence of Manhood

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In speaking on this subject, I use the word "manhood" in its generic sense referring to both manhood and womanhood. It is impossible to unravel that many-colored fabric of human life even in our imaginations. To attempt to suggest some of the fleeting thought and glimpses of the reality of life so that another may understand is even more impossible. Yet, in spite of the difficulty of the task, I want to attempt it this morning.

We go about among men in our daily relations. We meet them, classify them, judge them and think that we know something of them. Some of them we treat as the committees in congress treat objectionable legislation, we pigeonhole them. Others we draw into the inner circles of our life. They become close friends. We think we understand, but do we? We imagine that we can read them like a book, but like books too, there is the impenetrable essence of individuality that we do not strike. Indeed, we are apt to read into men as we read into books things that are in ourselves. So, I am trying not to read into men the things that are in myself, or the things that I wish were in myself and in others, but just to find a least common denominator of men and women so that we may judge and understand ourselves and humanity at large in a more just, sensible, and human light.

The long witness of history throws some light on this subject for us. The natural selections of the survivals of history, both in fact and in legend give us an especially unbiased insight into the secrets of our own lives, for these selections are made by a natural process, and the characters of history, legend and fiction that have survived, have survived just because they are

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911. While the manuscript says, "January 8, 1910," it is clear that 1911 is meant. Not only was this manuscript bound after the December 25, 1910 sermon, but tellingly January 8 falls on a Sunday in 1911, but not in 1910.

adapted to the environment in which they have won a place. So, their survival is silent and tremendous witness to the inner essence of manhood. The greatness of the historic figures who live in the pages of literary remains bear witness not only to their own greatness, but to the greatness of the heart of humanity, to whom, and for whom, and by whom, they have survived. This week marks the anniversary of the birth of Charles Sumner, perhaps the greatest of Massachusetts's senators, in that long list of distinguished men.² In the turmoil and struggle of his political life he was not understood. Massachusetts honored him to be sure, but not even Massachusetts understood him. Alone, unsupported, despised, unrecognized, except as he forced his recognition, he was the least popular, the least influential in a practical way, in a superficial way, of all the men of his time in Congress. Yet, with unerring justice, as time passes on, the men who bought and sold, who compromised, played politics, acted as timeservers, are passing to their oblivion. But Charles Sumner is just coming to his own. The acts which he was condemned for now appear to be worthy of praise. Even in his errors the public is forgiving, and perhaps as time rolls on we shall see that his errors were not so much his errors as ours. It is worthy of note that a man of such brave, uncompromising fidelity to truth, justice and honor has lived and served this nation in days of great stress. But also, it is worthy of note that as the stress of the conflict clears away there appear people who can appreciate such a man now that he is dead, and safe. All the traffickers in human flesh and human principles, who won the applause of their time, whose name was spoken with praise and popular approval, and whose opinions were capitalized and disposed of in the interests of prosperity, are passing to their well-regulated oblivion, while the name of Sumner is gaining. Theodore Parker was true to the human heart, true to the human sense of right and wrong, when he took the picture of Webster, the great Webster, from his wall and stored

² Charles Sumner (1811-1874), Senator from 1851 until his death in 1874. He was a leader in the anti-slavery forces and a leader of the "Radical Republicans" during the Civil War. He was fiercely attacked on the Senate floor by South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks on May 20, 1856 in retaliation for remarks that Brooks took to be disrespectful of his cousin, South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler.

it away in the closet.³ Webster had sold out, and Parker was one of the first, but not the last, to recognize that he had forfeited his right to a place of honor among those who would survive that age. Into his place came the fearless, courageous Sumner. Not ever did Parker have occasion to blush for Sumner. We do not have occasion today. Webster passes to his oblivion. Sumner comes to his own.

You go back through the pages of history and take a glance at those who have survived. Take the great characters of the Bible. A long line of kings, and haughty rabbis, who wore costly garments, and stood in the chief places of the synagogues, are forgotten, while Amos the poor and untutored herdsman of Tekoa survived. Hosea, the prophet of love, hangs on the walls of our homes in an imaginative picture, while we do not even know the names of the people of wealth, and power and social standing, whom his fearless tongue condemned.⁴ Jesus of Nazareth, the obscure carpenter of the despised town of Nazareth, has become the embodiment of the ideal of manhood for millions, while Herod the Great survives only because he chanced to rule while this obscure carpenter lived.⁵ The rich and powerful pope, and his equally rich and powerful subordinates in the Church and State of the Holy Roman Empire are forgotten, and their names are dragged into history only to serve as the setting for portraying the figure of the persecuted prophet of Florence, Savonarola.⁶

³ Theodore Parker (1810-1860) American transcendentalist and reform-oriented Unitarian minister. Daniel Webster (1782-1852) lawyer and statesman who served New Hampshire and Massachusetts in Congress; also served as the 14th and 18th U.S. Secretary of State under presidents Harrison, Tyler and Fillmore. Parker criticized Webster's views on slavery.

⁴ See the Old Testament books of Amos and Hosea.

⁵ Herod I (72BCE-4BCE) Roman Jewish client king of Judea. Davis contrasts Jesus with Herod in his June 13, 1909 sermon, "The Making of Reality," see <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/the-making-of-reality-june-13-1909/>.

⁶ Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) Italian Dominican Friar. In 1494 when Charles VIII of France invaded Italy Savonarola intervened and had the Medici's expelled creating a Republic of Florence. In 1495 Savonarola refused to join Pope Alexander VI's Holy League against the French. He defied the pope, preaching under a ban and campaigning for reform with bonfires of the vanities. Ultimately he was condemned, hanged and burned on May 23, 1498.

From among all the wealthy, educated, cultured, politicians who tolerated Lincoln in his day, the people have chosen the rough, but big-hearted human President as the embodiment of their ideal.⁷

Why is it that in all the ages we have such survivals as these men whom humanity delights to honor? If you stop to think of it for a moment you will see that they have survived because they ring true to humanity's heart. If humanity were false and base and unjust at heart, such men as these could by no means gain a hearing. Instead of Amos, we would have the life history and the records of the King whom Amos denounced. Instead of Jesus of Nazareth we would have the life of Herod. Nero would be survived instead of Paul,⁸ and an infamous pope instead of Savonarola. Webster instead of Sumner, and Douglas⁹ instead of Lincoln, and slavery instead of freedom. The long line of heroes whom humanity has honored bear silent, and sometimes tragic, witness to the inner essence of manhood. We read in the life and characteristics of her heroes the unuttered eulogy of the unnumbered millions who plodded along the pathways of human life. Even when the spark of honor, of courage and fidelity has not been strong enough to break out into light giving flame of its own, it has not been strong enough to break through the crusts that held it in subjection, even when it has stumbled along its pathways in error or even in degradation, still it has been strong enough to overcome the evil of its conditions with the faith in the worth of honor, integrity, justice, bravery, in the worth of manhood that was strong enough to nourish and support an atmosphere for these heroes to survive in. In their survival is the witness to the inner heart, the unrealized ideal of manhood. I mention these well-known names not especially to bear honor to them, but to bear honor to integrity, the essential manhood of the unnumbered millions who have made them what they are. Near-sighted indeed is he who can read only the life of one man in the life of a great [a few words missing here

⁷ Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) 16th American President.

⁸ Nero Claudius Ceasar Augustus Germanicus (37-68) fifth Roman Emperor from 54 to 68. Paul the Apostle, previously called Saul of Tarsus, (c.5-c.65) spread the teachings of Jesus in the first century.

⁹ Stephen Douglas (1813-1861) American politician who lost in the Presidential election of 1860 to Abraham Lincoln.

because of a torn page]. His life is the record of the thousands who have made him.

This is the essence of our manhood. It is the least common divisor of men and women. You may keep from me all the superficial secrets of your life, but once let me know your hero, I have entered the secret chambers of your personality. Take humanity then, in the long run, so that it has a chance to show the inner heart of it, and what do you find? What kind of men does it honor, respect, and love? Here the record of history is absolute. Men of courage, men of faith, integrity, men who have borne witness to the truth that was in them. Men who have cast behind them all conformity and acquainted men at first had with deity. He whose knowledge is the knowledge of the human personality, he who speaks with authority, and not as the scribes,¹⁰ he who bears witness, not as the stomach but to the manhood that is in him, they are the ones who have reached the roots of honor and the veins of gold in human life. They have tapped the springs of life that pour forth a stream of water from the depths of the inner man, a stream that drives the dirty filthy slime of conventionality from the surface and give the light of hope a chance to penetrate beneath.

Go where you will today, even into the most sordid conditions of life, and if you can but strike beneath the surface, you will find that same unblemished spark of manhood. In the outcast it smolders beneath the burden of life. In the pauper it still flickers amid the desperate night of clouded fear. In the degenerate it still keeps warm the hope of redemption. Even from the cell of prison a man who has tasted the bitterest dregs that human lips may touch can pour the richness of De Profundis.¹¹ It is not what we are that exalts us, but what we would be. Even in the man who is case-hardened in selfishness, and greed, and sensuality, there rises up a pitiable respect for the manhood achievements to which he would attain but cannot. Everywhere is the witness to the infinite possibilities of manhood and womanhood. Everywhere the seeds of nobility lie buried beneath the trash and rubbish of our conditions. They await only the opportunity to swell and grow and bear fruit. Let the gentle

¹⁰ Matthew 7:29.

¹¹ De Profundis, Latin for "from the depths," refers to an 1897 letter written by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) during his imprisonment for gross indecency.

softening rain of human fellowship trickle down through the surface covering of conditions, let the warm sun of hope and opportunity draw the growing sprouts to the surface, and the barren fields of our degradation and despair will blossom like the garden of the Lord.

That is what I am pleading for today and all the days that men and women shall have the opportunity to show and give expression to their real inner manhood and womanhood. I hate to see the millions spending all their time and energy and life in the ceaseless hopeless struggle for bread. Even the animal has a chance to rest, to play, but men, thousands of them work from one year's end to the other in ceaseless grinding toil just to buy the necessities of life. They have no hope, no prospect, nothing but toil for bread, and all the other possibilities of life are to them as nothing. Even the subtle joy of the home life, love of family, and children, even that is reduced to a minimum, and sometimes the wolf of poverty frightens love and honor from the home. It all seems so senseless to me, so futile, so beastly. It is as if we had a rich piece of ground upon which beautiful flowers might grow, and bear their product, and we would nurture only the weeds. Every time a flower would show its head, we would cut it down for fear it might drive out the weeds. We, sick and disgusted by the sight of weeds, longing for the sight of the flower, must needs satisfy our longing by looking at artificial flowers, or relics of the past preserved in some safe museum. Why not let the life that is today be rich? Why not remember that God is not dead, why not remember that life is just as sacred today as it ever has been? Why not remember this, that the essence of manhood which humanity all the ages has honored, is still alive in all human hearts today as the richest noblest thing in life?

Yes, I believe that we are remembering. In the spring, when the warm sun shines on the earth, and the rain has moistened it, if you get down close to the earth, and listen you will hear the soft sounds of growing life. The breaking of the seeds of the summer's beauty is mellowing the soil. Everything is alive, expectant, pregnant with the glory of the new day. I hear that sound in this human life of ours as I get down close to its pulsating heart, and hear its throbs quicken, and know that the rich red blood of life is bounding through the arteries of our whole social organism. That is the essence of our manhood that we should cherish, these values of life, not as they are

embodied in the idealized hero of history, but as they grow and expand in the living present. Courage, love, integrity, wisdom, honor, we have cherished as life values in our heroes of the past, because they have borne witness to our own unrealized longings and possibilities. Let the dead past bury its dead, while we honor and cherish the living present, and with courage, integrity, and wisdom and love press on to the tasks and the life that is before us. There is a legend that Constantine saw a vision of the cross blazing across the sky, and upon it were written the words, "In hoc signo vinces?" "Under this standard you will conquer."¹²

The symbolism of today is the torch of truth and manhood. Our task is not to conquer but to bear witness to the manhood and womanhood that is in us.

¹² Constantine I or Constantine the Great (c.272-337) Roman Emperor from 306 to 337. The first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity. According to Bishop Eusebius of Caesaria (c.260-339), Constantine was marching his army and saw a cross of light above the Sun with the Latin words, translated, "In this, conquer." By legend, this led to Constantine's conversion to Christianity.