

On the Shores of Darkness There Is Light

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WE MEET TOGETHER on the common ground of our humanity, witness to the commonality of mankind's search for answers to the terrible injustices of life and our yearning to be chalices, receptacles of the divine, however we name it. We are witness also to the wondrous truth that every human being — indeed every spark of life in air, sea, earth, and sky — is a *living being*, evolving in its own unique way toward ever keener awareness of its god-essence, yet all are one — living and moving and having our very existence within the ambience of the Cosmic Purpose.

I chose the title of this address from John Keats' poem "To Homer," the blind minstrel. It was found among Keats' papers after his death*:

Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green,
There is a budding morrow in midnight,
There's a triple sight in blindness keen;
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel
To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.

In his brief 25 years Keats — poet, seer, bard — suffered the agony and ecstasy of those who in moments of utter clarity are

* *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*, Cambridge Edition, p. 119.

favored by the gods. Whenever the immortals used him as their instrument, the springs of pure inspiration filled his soul and flowed through his pen. When the doorway closed temporarily, pain and loneliness were severe; yet it is apparent from his voluminous letters to friends and brothers and sister that even in the dark periods of illness and near despair, he hung on, knowing the light of divinity was there, and that once again its radiance would fill his being.

This is the message of theosophy, a message of *hope*: that within every one of us is the light of divinity, “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” irrespective of ideology or theology, or materialist bias. Theosophy tells of our divine ancestry going back many millions of years — far longer if we reckon beyond this universe to previous universes; that we are not pawns of any god or devil, nor do we have need for anyone to intercede for us between our Father within and the Father without, because we are all sparks from the celestial fire at the heart of Being, brothers and companions of the stars and of the gods. Most wondrous of all, theosophy illumines what Plato spoke of, that the Soul — using the term for the spiritual self here — “is immortal, having been born many times, and having seen all things that exist . . . has knowledge of them all,” so it really oughtn’t to be difficult to recapture “out of a single recollection all the rest,” if a person throws his heart and soul into it and does not give up — for, as he put it, “all enquiry and learning is but recollection,” remembering. (*Meno*, § 81c, p. 360, Jowett trans.)

Indeed we have survived many deaths; for death is part of our life cycle, not the end of existence. Everything that is born here will die, and be reborn, whether an atom, mineral, animal, human, star, galaxy, or a universe. Eventually, there will be a flowering for every living entity, since birth, death, and rebirth constitute the cyclic rhythm of nature, which works ever to bring out the hidden potentialities of her children.

As stated at the theosophical panel this morning, H. P. Blavatsky was the inspiring power behind the formation in 1875

in New York City of a society whose philosophic and ethical principles, far from diminishing in potency with the decades, have permeated the consciousness of humanity, so that we are no longer startled to hear allusions over TV or in literature to reincarnation and karma, to the ideals of compassion and, most of all, to brotherhood which has taken hold in a way undreamed of a hundred years ago — *even universal* brotherhood which enfolds every tiniest spark of life.

This may be philosophically inspiring, but is it enough? Last Sunday probably most of you heard Dr. Gerald Barney's eloquent appeal at the close of his report on the crucial issues facing the 21st century. Isaac Leeser's question, "*What Shall We Do?*," directed to the leaders of the many faith communities, was also meant for every human being: to wake up *now* to the reality of what we of the 20th century are bequeathing to our children and their children. When problems loom too large for the mind to grasp, if we have a tradition or philosophy that moves us profoundly, the tendency is to want to tell everyone that it has *the* answers to humanity's ills; or, frustrated at their lack of interest, to retreat into our own private thought world. Neither of these approaches is productive nor wise.

The first thing to realize, it seems to me, is that societal transformation cannot be produced globally, en masse; it is the falling of the water drop that wears away the stone. To achieve the global transformation Dr. Barney and his colleagues of the Millennium Institute so ardently are working for, requires *each* of us to perform in the privacy of our own soul the miracle of self-transmutation. We start from where we are, candidly examining where we unconsciously are contributing to the downgrading instead of the upbuilding of human and planetary life.

"The key to success," said Lord Beaconsfield, "is constancy to purpose." But to expect rapid, large-scale self-transformation is unrealistic; not everyone can even begin to think in this direction. The negative aspects of human nature which have run strong for millennia will not disappear overnight. Too many

lives are plunged in darkness and depression, and the world situation only compounds their condition.

Who of us isn't beside himself at times in contemplating the mountainous suffering and grueling pain we inflict upon our own kind? In a universe where beauty and order exist, in the farthest reaches of space as well as in the microworlds of the atom, why is it we humans with our marvelous intelligence and nobility descend so low as to commit deeds more bestial than any animal — and always at the expense of the innocent?

Something is sadly amiss, either with ourselves, or with the cosmos. Why should good come with evil, beauty with ugliness, truth with falsity — and the joy of birth be followed by the pain of parting, of death? What is the reality, apart from what we in our fevered state mistake it to be? Perhaps we need to view ourselves from a somewhat different perspective.

Why not image the entire drama of evolution, from the firefly to the polar star, as a dance of opposites, from the first point of light out of the immensity of darkness or chaos, to the extinction of our galaxy in a glory of light as it vanishes into the abyss of chaos and darkness from which, in long eons to come, it will again emerge into light as another universe? Planet, sun, galaxy, will come into active life again, each to continue its evolutionary journey toward self-awareness of its inborn divinity. The world's eternal ways: light is inherent in darkness; order, kosmos, inherent in chaos, as chaos is inherent in kosmos.

The two are inextricably linked.

A few verses from the Stanzas from the Book of Dzyan on which H. P. Blavatsky drew in writing *The Secret Doctrine*, her masterly synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy, are pertinent here:

THE ETERNAL PARENT WRAPPED IN HER EVER INVISIBLE ROBES HAD
SLUMBERED ONCE AGAIN FOR SEVEN ETERNITIES.

DARKNESS ALONE FILLED THE BOUNDLESS ALL, FOR FATHER, MOTHER,
AND SON WERE ONCE MORE ONE, AND THE SON HAD NOT YET AWAKENED
FOR THE NEW WHEEL, AND HIS PILGRIMAGE THEREON. . . .

ALONE THE ONE FORM OF EXISTENCE STRETCHED BOUNDLESS, INFINITE, CAUSELESS, IN DREAMLESS SLEEP; AND LIFE PULSATED UNCONSCIOUS IN UNIVERSAL SPACE, . . .

. . . THE UNIVERSE WAS STILL CONCEALED IN THE DIVINE THOUGHT . . .

DARKNESS RADIATES LIGHT, AND LIGHT DROPS ONE SOLITARY RAY INTO THE MOTHER-DEEP. THE RAY SHOOTS THROUGH THE VIRGIN EGG; THE RAY CAUSES THE ETERNAL EGG TO THRILL, AND DROP THE NON-ETERNAL GERM, WHICH CONDENSES INTO THE WORLD-EGG. . . .

BEHOLD, OH LANOO! THE RADIANT CHILD OF THE TWO, THE UNPARALLELED REFULGENT GLORY: BRIGHT SPACE SON OF DARK SPACE, WHICH EMERGES FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE GREAT DARK WATERS. . . .

THE ONE RAY MULTIPLIES THE SMALLER RAYS. LIFE PRECEDES FORM, AND LIFE SURVIVES THE LAST ATOM OF FORM. . . .

THIS IS THY PRESENT WHEEL, SAID THE FLAME TO THE SPARK. THOU ART MYSELF, MY IMAGE, AND MY SHADOW.

How closely this parallels the creation myths found in sacred traditions the world over, both in the formal religions and in the traditional lore of the aboriginal peoples of Africa, Australasia, and the Americas. A harmony as we approach their central essence, and a delightful diversity of expression toward the circumference — affirming oneness in divinity, difference in manifestation. So it is that everything that is born and dies — be it a trilobite, meadowlark, daisy, or star — lives its life cycle by virtue of the fact that in the secret space within its heart is the Logos, Brahman, God, name it as we will, without which it could not be.

The grand purpose behind this succession of births and deaths is the spiritual maturation of every particle of life. We humans are midway in the evolutionary stream between a god-spark unaware of its destiny and a fully evolved god. Nature utilizes whatever she has to hand, even the most despicable situation, to accomplish her purpose — to bring about change, transformation, a transmuting of base qualities into the gold of compassion. We are one humanity, and no one is immune from the tragic warp that is manifest in our mental and psychological

outlook. Just so, we are closer than we think to the gods, and never have we been bereft of spiritual guidance: every people we know of has received, either through revelation, tradition, or from an inspired teacher, a portion of sublime Inspiration from the guardians and protectors of humanity who hold in their keeping the sacred wisdom that is our human birthright.

“The stars shine brightest when the night is darkest.” Assuredly the present global upheaval is bringing to birth a profound stirring of humanity’s conscience and a larger awakening of spiritual responsibility — something of inestimable worth for the future of the human race. No matter how frightening and horrible the present circumstances, nature’s recorders are ever alert, reacting to every action in equal measure. The wheel of life turns ceaselessly, and day becomes night, and night disappears to herald another day.

By the same token, serenity and courage are inherent in the frantic hurly-burly of life, and at the core of deep depression is an atom of light. It may help to think of the yin-yang symbol: in the dark half is a small point of light; in the light half a small point of darkness. Let the atom of light in the dark portion grow and grow in imagination, until a fresh strength and a larger self-confidence are felt, a bulwark against the coming dark cycle when we tend to feel overpowered. Gradually, thoughts of light during the dark periods will become stronger and stronger; and yet when brighter cycles return it will be easier to avoid overconfidence and realize that these too will pass. Balance, equal-mindedness, difficult to attain, is nonetheless a worthy goal.

Is there, then, something amiss with the cosmos? While undeniably there is imperfection — there would be no incentive to growth if all were perfection — there is no basic flaw in the universal design, in nature, in the thinking and doing of those spiritual beings that use stars and planets for bodies, our earth as one of their mansions, and human beings as the human phase of their evolutionary unfoldment. In the context of infinity, nothing is irreparable, nothing without hope:

Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green,
There is a budding morrow in midnight,
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;

Theosophy as presented by H. P. Blavatsky in a beautiful synthesis of the world's accumulated wisdom, the natural inheritance of the race, assures us that at the heart of Being there is harmony, beauty, truth, and that universes come into being and disappear at regular intervals, each universe itself a host, the open doorway for trillions of living beings — monads, if you will — to descend as shooting stars to earth to take residence in human souls and then, growing greater still, become fully aware divinities.

Clearly, if humanity as a whole had such a vision, new hope would be ours, a new sense of purpose, a fresh insight as to who we are, why we are born on earth, and how we relate to our planet, to sun, moon, and stars. Theosophy has a long arc, as it takes in the evolutionary history of mankind going back beyond the origin of our present humanity. Could we soar far above our earthly cares with the eye of spirit, we would encompass the vast panorama of our human kingdom or life-wave stretching far into the past; and on our present earth we would see it awakening millions of years ago from its dream/sleep of innocence into awareness of its humanhood. Mind, intelligence, the vision of what could be, conscience, will, and desire, all claimed priority of attention. It was a wondrous period, as long as we heeded the counsel of the gods, "king-instructors" they were called. It is the old story, how in the arrogance of youth (as a race we were very young indeed) we brushed aside their guidance and they retreated from the scene, became "invisible" and hence "non-existent" to us.

Yet their "withdrawal" was timely and necessary in order for us to develop as independent, self-reliant beings — just as parents must in time step aside to allow their children to make their own decisions and mature through meeting the consequences of

their choices. But the gods are never far away — if they were, poets, musicians, artists, writers, and the millions of ordinary yous and mes would have to soar high indeed to capture their attention. Let us remember that not only do the gods exist “outside” us in nature, but that every life-particle, every life-atom in every kingdom, is a temple of a living god, and that we *are*, in truth, imbodyed divinities.

What specifically has theosophy to offer humanity in the closing years of our turbulent and war-ridden century? A philosophy that has been checked and verified by generations of seers who have had the courage, stamina, and love to prepare themselves through lives of discipline and training to comprehend the spiritual laws that work through and govern the physical universe. A philosophy that stands the strains of adversity; that wears well in proportion as it is lived and practiced, for it yields an ever-deepening confidence in the invincibility of the human spirit.

Whether theosophy will bring vision, insight, understanding, with its body of rich philosophical doctrines, depends upon ourselves. Blavatsky made clear at the outset in her first periodical, *The Theosophist*, that “The very root idea of the Society is free and fearless investigation.” This is why those who join a theosophical organization are not obligated to believe any of the doctrines; they are there for the taking or leaving. The only primal requisite is an acceptance of the principle of universal brotherhood and a willingness to try to think, speak, and act humanely in every circumstance.

The student is absolutely free to search and inquire and come to his or her own perception of values. The general tendency is to look for answers outside ourselves; we forget that no system of philosophical truths or of religious insights — including theosophy — is intended to provide specific prescriptions for every mental, psychological, or other symptom, but rather to reawaken us to the broad ethical and moral ideals on which the universe and every part of that universe is built.

It is significant to me that Gautama Buddha placed “right

views" first in the list of ethical requisites that comprised his Noble Eightfold Path. If the brethren could achieve right vision, right understanding, right views, then right speech, right action, and all the other requirements would in time be theirs. That is preeminently the role of theosophy — to help men and women reach toward a higher vision, a larger perception of their *dharma*, their inner duty to themselves and to humankind.

We glibly quote the biblical proverb: "where there is no vision the people perish" — usually omitting the second half — "but he that keepeth the law, happy is he." The Hebrew is terse, each word rich in meaning. Isaac Leeser's translation runs: "Without a prophetic vision a people become unruly; but when they observe the law (Torah), then will they be happy." To paraphrase: "Where there is no vision (no prophetic insight), the human community perishes (becomes unrestrained, *separate*), but when they give heed to the Torah (the spiritual Law), they are *united* (happy, steadfast, and all goes well)." The message is clear: unless we have some insight and understanding of our life's purpose — why we are born and why we must die — and of the meaning in pain and grief, a part of us does indeed perish, atrophy from neglect, from lack of use; a part of us becomes separated, alienated from our Source. Or, as the Hermetic writings put it, we feel lost, bewildered, "widowed of the presence of the gods."

A theosophic understanding may help us see our karmic circumstances no longer as an unjust fate but as an opportunity for growth, or for a clearing of the way before greater responsibilities can be ours. If the theosophic philosophy is cosmic in reach, all the better, for these ideals and teachings illuminate human problems precisely because we are the offspring and miniature counterparts of the universe, each of us containing in the small all that our cosmic parent does in the large — all of which emphasizes our close inner connection with every aspect of life, and as such is of great practical value in our lives.

The 1993 Parliament of Religions has taken on a challenging role, to cast the searchlight of spiritual vision on the critical prob-

lems facing us today: problems that have demanded short-term palliatives until long-range solutions can begin to take hold. In our complex world this is no simple matter; yet if every human being were for one month and then another month, and another — starting one day at a time to put aside his or her personal wants and give every ounce of thought and energy to the greater good of the whole, whatever the circumstances, wise solutions would become clearer.

One signal step in this direction would be never by the merest thought, word, or deed, to place an obstacle in the path of another. This may seem only negative help — but seriously practiced it could become a potent force for good, a dynamic expression of the Golden Rule which every tradition enjoins in one or another form. We pass off such individual spiritual measures as impractical, not applicable in the “real” world. Yet it is in just this manner that genuine progress for humankind could most quickly and effectively be made. What is more, people with the needed training and the daring and will to transform the “impossible” into workable solutions would be there, ready and waiting to serve.

We close with the prophetic lines of Keats, sent to his artist friend, Benjamin Robert Haydon, in November 1816, four years before Keats died. (*The Selected Letters of John Keats*, edited with an Introduction by Lionel Trilling, 1951, pp. 60-1.) As I read these lines, think how they could have been written for today!

Great Spirits now on Earth are sojourning . . .
And other Spirits are there standing apart
Upon the Forehead of the Age to come;
These, These will give the World another heart
And other pulses — hear ye not the hum
Of mighty Workings in a distant Mart?
Listen awhile ye Nations, and be dumb!

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