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AN AFFIRMATION OF LIBERALISM

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The following paragraphs are frankly personal, and the reader's forgiveness is asked for the repetition of the first person singular pronoun. I have been trying to think through the meaning, the credo, of liberalism, and since it is probable that many thousands of people are equally disturbed, the results of this mental exploration may be of some interest to others.

The problem really arose because of the fact that I am sure of my liberal views, and yet am quite unable to join the numerous organizations which foster "liberal" causes. Because I refuse to join such movements, some acquaintances denounce me as a hypocrite, others whisper that I am a reactionary, while still others are suspicious of dangerously radical tendencies. More casual acquaintances have dismissed me as a "tired liberal." This can hardly be correct, since I was not tired when young, but even then, and through the thirty succeeding years, I was never able to devote myself wholeheartedly to "causes." Crusading is not a part of my nature, and I refuse to struggle interminably against impenetrable barriers. Perhaps this is a way of rationalizing my "lone wolf" behavior, but I think not. In living my own life, in making judgments, and in teaching and advising young people, I have consistently taken what I regard as a truly liberal stand. More than that, I have tried to determine what the term "liberal" really means.

Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin have expressed their contempt for liberalism. They have ridiculed it as futile, inept, and outmoded Victorian sentimentality. Strong political leaders in all countries have cynically made use of crusading liberals and then cast them aside. And now we are frequently told that liberalism is trapped between two dominant extremes: the tenacious Right and the vigorous Left, with no hope for a free middle course. If the

cold realists who tell us these things are correct, we liberals may as well give up, or join one side or the other at the barricades.

Is it really liberalism which is so futile and so trapped? Or is it a distorted phantasm which emanates from liberalism but is not liberalism? I think the latter. Among my friends are many busy and vociferous crusaders for liberal causes who, to my way of thinking, make the same mistake that is implied by W. E. Henley: that they must choose between being bloody and unbowed, or bowed and unbloody. They earnestly concern themselves with a vast busy-ness. They organize committees for the defense of this or the preservation of that. Their names adorn the letterheads of countless do-good organizations. They seek the milder forms of martyrdom. History would seem to tell us that it is these busy liberals who have earned the contempt of the Right and the Left. I admire them, but the nonliberals don't. Their crusades against reaction always have been and always will be gallant but futile. How can anything permanent be accomplished by a multitude of atomized organizations, each of which is constantly splintering into still more organizations? The difficulty has been, of course, that liberals are by their very nature incapable of sustained co-work. A free liberal is necessarily a free thinker. He tries to escape the influence of mob thinking. Two liberals may share opinions on one subject and differ on all others. Each is always free to change his mind and differ from the other on even the one subject. He must therefore be something of a "lone wolf." This is why it is, and must be, inherent in liberalism that liberal organizations cannot survive. This explains why they either collapse or are captured by the Right or by the Left.

To me it would seem that the busy liberal is often not a liberal at all. He is apt to be quite intolerant of any views other than his own. He usually develops elaborate apologies for his own action and bitterly condemns all else. In many ways, these crusading "liberals" are very much like crusading oppressors. Left-wing agitators bear a surprising resemblance to right-wing vigilantes. The end tends to justify the means, and ordinary decency is apt to go by the board. These very busy people are usually so busy being active that they take inadequate time to think.

They lead themselves into traps, and they fail, as they have al-

ways failed, to reform the world. The future of human decency lies not in their hands, but in the hands of those thoughtful liberals who exert their influence slowly and with due regard for the facts of nature and of man. The influence of Plato, Leonardo da Vinci, and John Stuart Mill has been vastly greater than that of John Brown and Roger Baldwin. The meditative writings of Karl Marx have changed the course of empire, while his "action group," the First International, was a prompt failure.

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What, then, is my concept of liberalism? In answering this, it is first necessary to brush aside the misleading and erroneous analogy of the spectrum, with communism on the left, conservatism on the right, and liberalism in the middle. Liberalism is freedom from orthodoxy—independence of mind. It is radical on some questions and conservative on others. While it may at times go down the middle of the road, it may at others range far to either side. It has no kinship with doctrinaire positions at any extreme. The essential characteristics of free thinking, and hence of liberalism, are the recognition of, and tolerance for, natural facts. The perfect liberal would be tolerant of both reactionaries and radicals, of good and evil, of everything that is in nature. Notice that tolerance does not mean approval. Webster defines tolerance as "endurance," and I would add as a prefix "understanding." Because he understands it, a tolerant person can endure such evil as he must. He will disapprove of it and take advantage of reasonable opportunities to correct it, but he knows that it cannot be abolished through a great flurry of committee meetings. A liberal, then, is a tolerant person in this sense. He must retain freedom for his own thought, he must be free to reverse his position on any question if dispassionate judgment convinces him of an error. If he is to be free to do this, he will find few if any "action groups" which he can join with equanimity. On the contrary, he will find himself quite alone in a crowd.

This is not an escapist philosophy, nor an advocacy of the solitude of a hermit or a monk. On the contrary, it is an advocacy of an active liberalism which sees little value in endless committees and which accepts the facts that certain stone walls are at the

moment insuperable and certain barriers are with present tools impenetrable. The true liberal need not, cannot, "sit in a house by the side of the road." He must live and practice liberalism every moment. But his actions must be determined by his own personal judgment, rather than by the prejudice and hysteria which arise in mass meetings, organized committees, and vaunted "causes."

Human wisdom has not since surpassed the primary dictum of Socrates: "Know thyself." Perhaps the most significant embellishment of this proposition is the statement by Leonardo that "nature is the true mistress of superior intelligences." Let the liberal observe nature, with himself at the center of it. He will see that the law of the jungle, while cruel, is unprejudiced. He will see that "those who run with the wolves must howl with the wolves." Let him take himself to the unspoiled stillness of the high mountains and watch the sunset and the sunrise. Nature will teach him some of the great truths which he can never learn in the meaningless beating-about of committee meetings. Among the more profound of these truths is the knowledge that activity for the sake of activity is transitory whereas tolerance is the eternal guardian of conscious life. Nature is often savage and more often wasteful, but at the same time it is curiously tolerant. Because it is more tolerant than it is savage and extravagant, man has been evolved to his present high state. The social life of mankind cannot achieve an equally beneficent evolution unless it follows the same principle. This is why genuine liberalism cannot be smothered in the oppressive miasma of busy-ness. It has survived countless "terrors" through the years of history, and is less futile, less inept, and less nearly dead than ever before.