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ROOSEVELT
THE MORALIST IN ACTION

Memorial Address

BY

GEORGE HENRY PAYNE

**Commissioner of Taxes and Assessments, City of New York;
President Eastern and Middle West Travelers'
Association**

AT

ST. JAMES' EPISCOPAL CHURCH
NEW YORK CITY

FEBRUARY 9, 1919

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ROOSEVELT

THE MORALIST IN ACTION

The end of all moral speculation is to teach us our duty; and by proper representation of the deformity of vice and beauty of virtue, beget correspondent habits, and engage us to avoid the one and embrace the other. But is this ever to be expected from inferences and conclusions of the understanding which of themselves have no hold of the affections, nor set in motion the active powers of men? They discover truths, but where the truths which they discover are indifferent, and beget no desire or aversion, they can have no influence on conduct or behavior. What is honorable, what is fair, what is becoming, what is noble, what is generous, takes possession of the heart, and animates us to embrace and maintain it. What is intelligible, what is evident, what is probable, what is true, procures only the cool assent of the understanding; and gratifying speculative curiosity puts an end to our researches.

Hume, "Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals."

I have chosen to-day to speak of Theodore Roosevelt the moralist, and I have so chosen because all that I have seen of the man, as I understood him, was inseparable from the moralist. Even in the midst of a bitter campaign when the political furies seemed to be let loose, and when in his answer to attacks and in his own attacks, he was showing an energy and dialectic skill, a physical energy and courage that we do not associate with those interested humanly in the fundamental things of life; even then, to me the most absorbing side, the side I was not able to forget, was the moralist.

We could speak of Roosevelt the wit, for he had a delightful wit. We could speak of Roosevelt the statesman, and to-day throughout the breadth of this land he will be so discussed, and history will record gratefully his achievements in that field. We could speak of Roosevelt the soldier, and it is a thrilling thing to think that he never flinched in any fight that he was in, and his last noble ambition was to die on the battlefield for his country. We can speak of Roosevelt the naturalist and the traveller, but these are phases that may more properly be dealt with by specialists. We could speak of him as an author, as a scholar. But if he had any mission in life, as he surely had, it was to make those who came in contact with him see things deeply, to see things in their larger significance; as for myself I believe we are following more in his footsteps if we try to see the deeper significance of his own life.

When we speak of moralists, we of to-day are a little apt to confuse them with the metaphysical philosophers, with the great intellects of the past two or three hundred years who have dominated the purely intellectual world. We are also apt to follow the French definition of the moralist and regard the word as descriptive of a *genre* of writing, as exemplified by La Roche foucauld.

But it is not the Adam Smith, the Kant, or the Descartes type of moralist that I have in mind when I speak of Roosevelt, nor yet the Chamfort, La Bruyere moralizer, it is the moralist who was also a man of action, the St. Augustine, the Franklin, the Emerson type, the man of large vision who not only urged the proper and lofty life, but who endeavored to make his own life an example of his philosophy; who endeavored to move men not only by what he preached, but by visualizing for them the benefits of his precepts.

It is not easy to attain the historical perspective. A forgotten American author, Horace Binney Wallace, once declared that "Foreign opinion was a sort of contemporaneous posterity." Foreign opinion of Roosevelt, when the present great crisis in the history of the world has passed, will be, I think, that he was interested in not only the problems of to-day, but more than anything else in the problems of the future; and in the conduct of the American public, not only as it affected themselves, but as it influenced the entire world—that was his absorbing thought.

He was a devoted, a vigorous, and a continuously combated exponent of Americanism. It was not that he wished his nation to have selfish advantages over other nations and other peoples. It was because he felt that only through the upbuilding of the great American ideal, the world would be bettered. In a day when sham intellectuality was turning toward the silly dream of internationalism, when Anarchistic elements were endeavoring to undermine the great Christian idea of democracy; he was the rugged exponent of American traditions, not that he wished her to triumph alone in material ways, but that America safe, prosperous, proud and vigilant, would be, as it has been in the past, the land of ideals among nations, and the haven of the oppressed among peoples.

As a man he typified all that he believed, and it was interesting to one who had a great opportunity to listen to his analysis of himself to realize that no matter what the penalty or privation was, no matter how great the sacrifice, or how great the concentration necessary, he neglected nothing that might prepare him for good citizenship.

It was in the late summer of 1910 that I first came to know Colonel Roosevelt, shortly after his return from Africa. He had been President of the United States and

had left that high office with prestige such as few of our Presidents had enjoyed; it was, indeed, partly because of his feeling that his presence in the country might be embarrassing to his successor that he had undertaken the long and interesting exploration trip from which he had just returned. The State of New York, as you may recall, had just suffered an awful shock in the revelations that attended the Allds trial during which it was discovered that men high in the councils of the Republican party had been guilty of the most brazen corruption. That the corruption was not general it was true, but that the moral tone of the party was low was equally true, and men who ordinarily take little interest in politics felt that unless there was a change in the management and an improvement in the tone, the great party would have little right to expect public support.

Men were urging Colonel Roosevelt to take a hand in the State contest for the control of the party and at a time when he was known to be reluctant to do so I travelled to Oyster Bay as the correspondent for a New York paper, with the keen interest of one of the younger generation of his party who felt the disgrace that the party was undergoing. I shall never forget that interview. I presented my letter with some diffidence, I might say timidity, for he was a world character, his eight years as President had separated him from New York and New Yorkers and I felt very humble in the presence of the great man. I expected to stay perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes, I stayed nearly two hours, and when I came out it was the feeling of one who had walked in high places.

Instead of the aloofness and the reserve that I had expected, I was warmed and thrilled by the simplicity of the man who was apparently anxious to make himself under-

stood to a younger and unknown man. He had been President, he explained, in a simple, homely way, and he believed that what influence he had with the people would be lessened if he entered into a contest in which there were good men on both sides, though the one group represented reactionary ideas and had allowed evils to grow up. He pointed out what was very true, that in almost every State in the Union he was being called on to say something about local contests, and that the moment he involved himself in the New York contest his enemies would declare that he had political ambitions and that his activity was due to self seeking.

It was a great quality of Roosevelt that he placed younger men at ease, and his own warmth invectious, I soon found myself in an argument with the man whom I had been led to believe intolerant of all opposition.

"But," I said, "is it not your duty to do this even if you are to be misunderstood?" and I remember the whimsical smile with which he remarked that if he were sure it was his duty the fear of being misunderstood was not going to stand in his way. And it was a disagreeable duty, for he finally entered the lists as the candidate for the temporary chairmanship of the Republican State convention, a fight, as he said himself, for the opportunity to make a speech, when he spent much of his time in those days refusing invitations to make speeches. But he went through to the bitter end, misunderstood and abused a good deal for not being content with having been President, and accused, if you will recall, of having terrible ambitions, among them of wanting to be king.

This may seem to some purely a piece of forgotten and not particularly interesting political history, but I saw a great deal of him in that campaign, and I never could quite feel that his was solely a political activity. He had told me

in that first interview at Oyster Bay that at any time I felt the necessity of calling on him I should feel free to come, and up to within two weeks of his death, when I saw him in Roosevelt Hospital, I never had the slightest difficulty in getting to him. I had in that first interview, knowing that he had been reluctant to discuss State politics with some who had called on him, apologized for asking some blunt question; and he stated then that I need never hesitate about asking him a question, and he would always answer frankly. I should like to state here that this promise, too, was always kept. I say this because from that time on I enjoyed what were perhaps unusual privileges for a younger man, and had an insight into his motives, and, again I say, I never could see his actions in those political moves except in a moral light.

Think how little there was, if anything, for him to gain by the disagreeable contest into which he entered. Surely not fame—he had left the Presidency with the reputation of being one of the greatest of Presidents. Political power—he risked all he had by merely taking part in what the rest of the country regarded as a local political squabble. I used to hear, in those days, people say that he had the “habit” of making speeches, that he had the “habit” of being in what they called the “limelight.” As an ardent advocate and friend those criticisms annoyed me for a while, but I came to realize that it was difficult for people who had never known the joys of literary composition, who had never felt the exaltation that comes with scholarly pursuits to understand the Roosevelt home with its great library, and its beautiful domesticity, to appreciate what manner of man Roosevelt was at heart; and how impossible it was for the uninitiated to understand, as Milton phrased it, the scholar’s “unwillingness to leave the quiet and still air of delightful

studies to embark on a troubled sea of noises and harsh disputes."

And yet there is a sanctification that comes in the solitude of the study, that leads those dwelling there to a high sense of duty, that makes them hesitate at neither pillory nor prison, nor death, when the martyrdom is put upon them.

I have referred at length to this incident of 1910 because it led to the issues of 1912 which were so largely misunderstood, and are misunderstood to-day, as far as he was concerned, and because it seems to me the keynote of that side of him that was most dominant, and has been least accented by both his friends and those opposed to him. I would not on this occasion or from this pulpit wish to plead any special cause, or to introduce the slightest political argument, but we must look, in fact it is our duty to look, for the moral issues that are sometimes involved in political matters as they are involved at times in every phase of life.

John Morley says that politicians and statesmen have the habit of confusing one another and frequently themselves because they frequently talk of one thing when they are thinking of another. It is a habit I fear that we are all prone to. We are especially prone to fall into that error when our passions are aroused. We frequently say that the other man is wrong when we mean that we don't agree with him. There is nothing morally wrong or right in believing in free trade or protection. It is a mere question of economic expediency. It is morally wrong, however, for us to advocate laws that will permit men to work for wages that will not permit them to live as human beings should live in a civilized community. There is nothing moral in the question of Municipal Ownership or of States Rights, or

Budgetary Control, but in each and every one of those questions a moral issue may develop under particular circumstances, if a human being is deprived of his opportunity to live as God's man, or if crime and corruption may be checked.

There were no moral issues involved in the main in the contest of 1912, for there always will be an honest difference of opinion in this country among thoughtful men as to whether this country will be governed best by a representative body of men, rather than by pure democracy. But the moral issue did become involved, when under the controlled or representative idea of government, the tendency developed to look more to the value of the property of the country than to its human beings.

I rode with Theodore Roosevelt on the train from New York to Boston the day after he had decided to be a candidate for the Republican nomination and he was a very sad man. That was in February, 1912, and he said then: "I think we shall not win, but the fight must be made." I was enthusiastic over his proposed candidacy, the prospect of an exciting campaign and being near the great man during it was very alluring, and I hopefully declared that the people would rise and support him enthusiastically.

"It may be possible," he answered, "but we must be prepared to lose—it is our *duty* to make the fight," and he smiled whimsically to recall to me my own speech of a little more than a year before when I had pleaded with him to enter the New York State fight.

I am well aware that in speaking of a man who was so often in the thick of the political discussion of his country, and who so often was the center of political debate, there will be those who will misunderstand this analysis of him

as a moralist, and that is why I wish to emphasize the necessity of our differentiating between his political and economic views, and those in which ethical questions were involved.

His moral attitude on public matters and with regard to his own political activity cannot be made more clear than he did himself on the night when he was shot in Milwaukee in 1912.

You will recall that he was on his way to a meeting when an insane man pushed his way through the crowd, and standing a few feet from him shot him in the breast. The revolver was of the type used by cowmen in the Southwest, with a carriage of a larger calibre than the revolver itself, the purpose of this being to give added force to the bullet. The shot knocked him down, but he was on his feet in a moment, and when the infuriated crowd was about to beat the assailant into insensibility, he, the man who had just been shot, with a bullet in his breast, ordered them to desist and to bring the man nearer that he might see who he was.

"I don't know him," he said, and then ordered the chauffeur to drive to the meeting place, although those in the automobile with him begged him to go to a hospital. When he arrived at the hall where he was to speak, he was bleeding profusely, and the doctors urged him not to attempt to speak, for the bullet had gone through his overcoat, a copy of his speech in the pocket of his undercoat, and had torn an ugly and ragged wound in his breast.

He coughed once or twice intentionally to see if he was spitting blood.

"It has not touched my lungs," he said, "I shall speak, it may be my last speech, but if it is my last speech it is my duty to protest against this very sort of thing with my last breath."

And he did speak, and without regard to the issues of that day, or the issues of any day that are purely political, he voiced his magnificent belief in the American sense of fair-play, in the American tradition of law and order, and the American principle of liberty and democracy.

I have referred to his occasional analyses of himself. They were never forced and the two or three times that he indulged in analytical retrospection came at the end of an explanation or a defense of some matter in which he desired to be perfectly understood by the few intimates to whom he was talking.

"I am just the average American," he said one day, "with the sympathies of the average American," and then he went on to explain that all that he had accomplished had been purely the result of hard work.

I quoted back to him the statement of Darwin that "genius is the capacity for taking infinite pains," and he added "with sympathy."

Never to those who knew him well did he take the aloof attitude, never did he assume that he was greater than, or superior to those with whom he differed. As the Latin poet said, "nothing human was alien to him," and in explaining his political success he declared that the things that had seemed to be most clever politically were the result of his indignation over a wrong condition, and his inability to tolerate an evil condition.

It will be recalled that some years ago he sued a Western editor who had printed untruthful statements as to his personal habits in the matter of alcohol. I had not seen the article, and had heard very little about it, although I, like many other of his friends, was acquainted with the fact that those who did not like him were unscrupulous in their untruthful statements as to his habits.

There never was a more temperate man in this country.

I went down to Oyster Bay one day, and after we had discussed other things that were in the order of the day, he asked me if I had heard of or seen this attack accusing him of intemperance. I said I had not, and that I did not believe that it was worthy of his notice.

"That might be," he said, "if it were not for the fact that day after day I am receiving letters like this one that I have in my hand, from mothers saying that they had taught their boys to look up to me, and that it was a shock to them to learn that I had been unfaithful to my trust. I owe them a refutation."

And it was not because of his physical comfort, not because of any desire for political advantage that he went through that disagreeable trial, but because he wished to be true to those who regarded him, not as a political leader, but as a moral standard bearer.

Though "he touched life at nearly every point at which it is possible for the human soul to put forth its tendrils into the universe," the main current of his thought, the passionate desire of his life was for what was right, for what was fundamentally true. It was this that gave him his great energy and industry, it was this that made his interests so broad, that made him personally so sympathetic and so greatly beloved. Those who were able to look into his heart and those who knew him well found there nothing mysterious—they found a well of affection for humanity, and especially for his own countrymen, that changed their entire point of view and made them better and wiser. It was the faculty of seeing clearly, and the ability to express himself in simple exact English that made him so irritating to his opponents in a controversy. He was above all things else unselfish, the most perplexing characteristic of all, to

those who did not know him and were opposed to him. I have gone to him in behalf of all kinds of people and for a variety of causes and I always found him sympathetic and interested, always willing to assist those whose cause was worthy of the slightest support.

Much was written about his ambitious nature. His ambition was for his country. A month before he died we talked of his possible nomination for the Presidency in 1920. "If the people want me I may be the candidate," he said, and when I stated my belief that his nomination was inevitable, he answered, "if it were to take place to-day that might be so, but we can not tell what will take place in the next two years."

The American people have lost a great friend, a great leader—Great Heart indeed, has gone. To those to whom it was given to be near him and understand him there must be not so much the feeling of terrible loss as the feeling of great responsibility, for that was his way, nobly, beautifully his way, and his way shall be our way, as God gives us strength: but

O! for the touch of the vanished hand
And the sound of the voice that is still.







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