

SPIRITUAL LEGACIES

Last week I was listening to Respighi's *Ancient Dances and Airs*, Suite No.3 for Strings, "Italiana." Respighi lived over 100 years ago and based the suite on music from the Renaissance — music composed between 1575 and 1625. Although I was unaware of those details until recently, I did know that listening to this music could make me feel ecstatic. The same is true for other works, like the second movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* or Wagner's *Prelude to Die Meistersinger* (conducted by Szell). I sometimes thank the composers for what they have done. That might sound silly — I know they didn't compose the music with me in mind — but it's the best I can do to express my gratitude. I also enjoy rock tunes and other genres, but that's another story.

It's like this: people — musicians in this case — who lived over a century ago continue to uplift us and make us happy because of what they accomplished in their lifetimes. The same can be said, of course, for authors, poets, philosophers, architects, film makers, sculptures, and painters. We gain too from the valuable efforts of inventors and scientists: how about the refrigerator? Political thinkers like Jefferson and Voltaire have enriched us as well; and let's not forget the spiritual luminaries. Jesus ("Love one another"), Buddha ("There is a way out of suffering"), and all the rest have influenced society profoundly. We grow from their works.

All of these people lived, expressed themselves, and left the stage; yet, their light reflects down the hallway of time and shines around us today. These beings have left a legacy from which we continue to receive benefit, pleasure, and inspiration.

Macro Scale

Not everyone is a genius. Not everyone can make a monumental contribution to society. Genius may be the result of Providence, spiritual evolution, genes, or what have you. However, as in the example I cited above, Respighi, although a genius, was inspired by composers who lived centuries before him. He built on previous works. In music and in most other fields, no one creates in a vacuum; no one does it alone. For instance, we aren't going to have refrigeration without a power source ("currently" electricity), which was discovered by others. The new is built on the old and in relation to other creations.

We can take this idea of interconnectedness to the extreme and say that everyone plays a part in the creation of anything good (or bad) simply because they are part of the human race. And though the idea "We are all one" is true, it stretches the definition of legacy thin, at least in reference to specific inventions or discoveries. For instance, Mayan peasants had little direct influence on Copernicus' mind-expanding proposal that the earth traveled around the sun and not visa versa. The truth is closer to this: some people leave a definite positive legacy while others leave a definite negative one. Warmongers, for example, fit neatly into the latter category. Those who contribute to the welfare of the whole fit into the former. The majority of the population occupies the territory between the two.

Balanced Scale

Unfortunately, reality, being beyond dualism, does not always conform to the categories we create. Neither are issues always black and white as fundamentalist groups worldwide portray them. For instance, we could say that Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and other leaders (past and present) have clearly shown us the terrible price we must pay for the abuse of power. We learn from them the value of peace, truth, compassion, and justice — traits they so obviously lacked. We also learn that words can deceive, however noble, logical, and sincere they may sound. To discover the truth, we have learned to look at a person's actions and the results they produce rather than base our conclusions on the words they speak. Talk is not always cheap: it can be quite expensive. In short, we don't listen and automatically believe; instead, we watch, and even then, we watch consciously.

Micro Scale

On an individual level, if we are not geniuses, then how can we live a worthwhile life and leave a positive legacy to humanity? One way is to do something that would be generally good for everybody, like to try making others happy. If we did that, then we would be contributing to the positive legacy "cause," at least in the moment. After all, we call the good works of the past "positive legacies" because they make people happy.

If we expand the definition of legacy to include acts that have a definite value, but they last only for a moment, then a positive legacy could be a simple act of kindness. The act might not stretch distinctly into future generations but would produce short-term happiness. The healing and life-affirming effects of kindness diffuse gently through time and society, from one soft moment to the next. History itself is no more than a multidimensional string of unbroken moments. By using our "genius" of being kind, we can build a subtle but powerful legacy, because these acts have a cumulative effect. Blessed are the peacemakers.

In addition, if we do good even with a momentary gesture, it makes both parties feel good. How can that be bad? You can use this technique with everyone, like with people who are waiters: talk to them, make them smile. That way, both go away with good thoughts and feelings. What happens is that people remember us and we remember them much more than if we had not made a conscious effort to make them happy or smile. Everyone deserves to enjoy life, if even for a few seconds. We leave a legacy to the person . . . we remember each other . . . we have made a connection. This is the smaller picture, which can grow into a big picture if all of us treat each other with love and kindness.

Possibilities

This moment-to-moment legacy plan may sound oversimplified. Maybe it is. The implications, though, go beyond seemingly isolated acts of kindness. Not only does the axiom "What goes around, comes around" apply, but metaphysically, each individual act directs the course of the history — not in any necessarily crucial way, certainly — but in minute increments. If, for example, everyone took every opportunity to hurt someone, then our current reality would rapidly deteriorate into hell on earth. It's not a far leap, then, to imagine the opposite development: if everyone took every opportunity to be kind to someone, then our reality would soon enough transform into Heaven on Earth. This sounds simple, but is it idealistic? Perhaps; but in theory and practice, it works.

Ah, Yes — the Hurdles

Individually, the difficulty is that even those with the best intentions occasionally become embroiled in their mental and emotional perspectives, some of which are distorted and reactionary. In this sense, no one is perfect; now and then we take a brief detour and create a mini version of hell on earth. We must also consider that some people have little interest in making others happy. That is why evolution, both personal and collective, is a step-by-step process. It takes time and practice.

Collectively, our problem is that when we elevate people to positions of power, they tend to grow greedy; they treat others as less than human. Historically, the devastation these seemingly soulless creatures have created through warfare — military, economic, and psychological — far exceeds the suffering even the most psychopathic but unempowered individual can inflict.

In any case, to make our legacy a "heavenly" one requires, at the minimum, a commitment to be kind to one another. We can take this a step further and say that as we train ourselves to transcend our egocentric habits and see beyond ourselves, we raise our consciousness. From a metaphysical perspective, when a person develops his or her consciousness, it energetically raises the collective unconscious — the overall state of humankind's psyche. This in itself is a noble and worthwhile pursuit.

Conclusion

Thinking about what one will leave to the world is something older people do. That's partly because young people seldom seriously consider their own mortality. However, ignoring one's effect on others can lead to regret later in life: we are never too young or too old to consider our impact on the world. To complicate matters, it's hard to recognize the influence that we are having on others. Confucius, for example, died thinking that his teachings amounted to nothing. Conversely, we have leaders who believe history will remember their murderous exploits as those of heroes who "spread democracy."

On a grander scale, we can consider the spiritual evolution of the human race. This is not a one-person job — it's a collective legacy. Each of us is involved: we either inch the collective unconscious towards that goal or away from it. If we succeed in this project, we may even produce something more amazing than, say, the refrigerator.

Everyone can help create a joyous reality for others; and it helps to do this not for one's own benefit but for the cause, because that helps remove the ego from the equation. When we become self-less, something wonderful fills the void, and we become even more effective as the universe unfolds effortlessly through us.