

Thoughts on Man's Purpose in Life

By Adm. Hyman G. Rickover

This speech was delivered by Adm. Rickover at a Luncheon Meeting of the San Diego Rotary Club, San Diego, California, on Thursday, February 10, 1977.

Voltaire once said: "Not to be occupied and not to exist are one and the same thing for a man." With those few words he captured the essence of a purpose in life: to work, to create, to excel, and to be concerned about the world and its affairs.

The question of what we can do to give purpose or meaning to our lives has been debated for thousands of years by philosophers and common men. Yet today we seem, if anything, further from the answer than before. Despite our great material wealth and high standard of living, people are groping for something that money cannot buy. As Walter Lippman said: "Our life, though it is full of things, is empty of the kind of purpose and effort that gives to life its flavor and meaning."

I do not claim to have a magic answer. But I believe there are some basic principles of existence, propounded by thinkers through the ages, which can guide us toward the goal of finding a purpose in life.

Among these principles of existence, responsibility is the one which forces man to become involved. Acceptance of responsibility means that the individual takes upon himself an obligation. Responsibility is broad and continuous. None of us are ever free of it, even if our work is unsuccessful.

Responsibility implies a commitment to self which many are not willing to make; they are strongly attracted to accepting a course of action or direction for their lives imposed by an external source. Such a relationship absolves the individual from the personal decision-making process. He wraps himself in the security blanket of inevitability or dogma, and need not invest the enormous amounts of time, effort and, above all, the thought required to make creative decisions and meaningfully participate in the governance of his life.

Responsibility also implies a commitment to others, or as Confucius taught, each of us is meant to rescue the world. It is the business of little minds to shrink from this task or to go about it without enthusiasm. Neither art, nor science, nor any of the great works of humanity would ever come into

The sense of responsibility for doing a job right seems to be declining. In fact, the phrase "I am not responsible" has become a standard response in our society to complaints on a job poorly done. This response is a semantic error. Generally what person means is: "I cannot be held legally liable." Yet, from a moral or ethical point of view, the person who disclaims responsibility is correct: by taking this way out he is truly not responsible; he is irresponsible.

The unwillingness to act and to accept responsibility is a symptom of America's growing self-satisfaction with the status quo. The result is a paralysis of the spirit, entirely uncharacteristic of Americans during the previous stages of our history. Even complaints about high taxes and high prices are illusory. Behind them is hidden the reality that the majority, in terms of sheer creature comfort, never had it so good. Those who are still on the outside looking in are not strong or numerous enough to make a political difference.

The task of finding a purpose in life also calls for perseverance. I have seen many young men who rush out into the world with their messages, and when they find out how deaf the world is, they withdraw to wait and save their strength. They believe that after a while they will be able to get up on some little peak from which they can make themselves heard. Each thinks that in a few years he will have gained a standing, and then he can use his power for good. Finally the time comes, and with it a strange discovery: he has lost his horizon of thought. Without perseverance, ambition and a sense of responsibility have evaporated.

Another important principle of existence which gives purpose and meaning to life is excellence. Because the conviction to strive for excellence is an intensely personal one, the attainment of excellence is personally satisfying. Happiness comes from the full use of one's power to achieve excellence. Life is potentially an empty hole, and there are few more satisfying ways of filling it than achieving and exercising excellence.

This principle of excellence is on which Americans seem to be losing, and at a time when the Nation stands in need of it. A lack of excellence implies mediocrity. And in a society that is willing to accept a standard of mediocrity, the opportunities for personal failure are boundless. Mediocrity can destroy us as surely as perils far more famous.

It is important that we distinguish between what it means to fail at a task and what it means to be mediocre. There is all the difference in the world between the life lived with dignity and style which ends in failure, and one which achieves power and glory, yet is dull, unoriginal, unreflective, and mediocre. In a real sense, what matters is not so much whether we make a lot of money or hold a prestigious job; what matter is that we seek out others with knowledge and enthusiasm—that we become people who can enjoy our own company.

In the end, avoiding mediocrity gives us the chance to discover that success comes in making ourselves into educated individuals, able to recognize that there is a difference between living with excellence and living with mediocrity. Sherlock Holmes once told Dr. Watson, "Watson, mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself. It takes talent to recognize genius." To which he could have added, it takes talent to know that what counts is condemning mediocrity not in others but in ourselves.

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we should honor excellence, but not necessarily with material rewards alone. The Japanese have a custom which I believe it would be well for us to emulate. Instead of honoring their artists with peerages or knighthoods, they give them the respectful title, "National Human Treasure."

Creativity is another of the basic principles of existence which I believe help to give purpose in life. The deepest joy in life is to be creative. To find an undeveloped situation, to see the possibilities, to decide upon a course of action, and then devote the whole of one's resources to carry it out, even if it means battling against the stream of contemporary opinion, is a satisfaction in comparison with which superficial pleasures are trivial.

To create you must care. You must have the courage to speak out. The world's advances always have depended on the courage of its leaders. A certain measure of courage in the private citizen also is necessary to the good conduct of the State. Otherwise men who have power through riches, intrigue, or office will administer the State at will, and ultimately to their private advantage. For the citizen, this courage means a frank exposition of a problem and a decrying of the excesses of power. It takes courage to do this because in our polite society frank speech is discouraged. But when this attitude relates to questions involving the welfare or survival of the Nation, it is singularly unfitting to remain evasive. It is not only possible, but in fact duty of everyone to state precisely what his knowledge and conscience compel him to say. Many of today's problems can be brought forward only by complete candor and frankness; deep respect for the facts, however unpleasant and uncomfortable; great efforts to know them where they are not readily available; and drawing conclusions guided only by rigorous logic.

To have courage means to pursue your goals, or to satisfy your responsibilities, even though others stand in the way and success seems like a dream. It takes courage to stand and fight for what you believe is right. And the fight never ends. You have to start it over again each morning as the sun rises. Sir Thomas More wrote: "If evil persons cannot be quite rooted out, and if you cannot correct habitual attitudes as you wish, you must not therefore abandon the commonwealth. You must strive to guide policy indirectly, so that you make the best of things, and what you cannot turn to good, you can at least make less bad."

These principles of existence—responsibility, perseverance, excellence, creativity, courage—must be wedded with intellectual growth and development if we are to find meaning and purpose in our lives. It is a device of the devil to let sloth into the world. By the age of twenty, some of us already have adopted a granite-like attitude which we maintain throughout life. Intellectually, we must never stop growing. Our conscience should never release us from concern for the problems of the day. Our minds must be forever skeptical, yet questioning. We must strive to be singularly free from that failing so common to man, deplored by Pascal in the "Pensees," of filling our leisure with meaningless distractions so as to preclude the necessity of thought. To be an intellectual in the fullest sense, one's mind must be in constant movement.

Aristotle believed that happiness was to be found in the use of the intellect. In other words, ignorance is not bliss; it is oblivion. The inspired prayer does not ask for health, wealth, prosperity, or anything material, but says, "God, illumine my intellect." Man cannot find purpose in his life without expanding and using his intellectual qualities and capacities. Liberal learning is a primary

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critical perspectives that transcend specialized interest and partisan passions, the capacity to understand complexity and to grow in response to it.

A cause of many of our mistakes and problems is ignorance—an overwhelming national ignorance of the facts about the rest of the world. A nation, or an individual, cannot function unless the truth is available and understood; no amount of good on the part of the leaders or the media will offset ignorance and apathy in the common citizen. Since the United States is a democracy, the broad answer is that all of us must become better informed. Reading is one method of accomplishing this purpose. By spending a few dollars for a book, the thoughts and life's work of a great man are available to us.

The proof of living, as Norman Cousins has said, "is in memory, and all of us, through reading, can live five or six lifetimes in one. Through reading, the sluices of the mind open up, making accessible a range of experiences otherwise beyond our personal reach." In reading books, we grow both emotionally and intellectually.

As a reader, man is unique among living things. The ability to read—and more broadly, the ability to express complex ideas through language—distinguishes him from all other lifeforms. Without language, complex thought is inconceivable and the mind is undeveloped. The inability to speak and write imprisons thought. In the same vein, sloppy, imprecise thinking begets sloppy, imprecise language. Language and thought are interconnected, and the written word is the vehicle which best advances both.

Therefore, I count reading, and its associated skill, writing, among the most significant of all human efforts. Good writing, after all, is simply the result of enormous reading, detailed research, and careful thought. It means studying to gain a good vocabulary and practicing to learn how to use it. It seems to me that these kindred skills should be developed and nourished from the very first, if man is to grow intellectually. And unless he can express his thoughts well, he can exert little influence on his fellowmen.

I now will discuss on final principle of existence essential to man's purpose in life: the development of standards of ethical and moral conduct. God, it is generally conceded, has made a remarkable job of the physical universe but has, strangely, not done quite so well with the spiritual element. There is abundant evidence around us to conclude that morals and ethics are becoming less prevalent in people's lives. The standards of conduct which lay deeply buried in accepted thought for centuries no long are absolute. Many people seem unable to differentiate between physical relief and moral satisfaction; they confuse material success in life with virtue.

The decline in morals parallels the decline of traditional religion in all areas of our society. In our desire to separate church and state, we have gone to the opposite extreme and have exorcised religious training from our public schools and colleges, thus depriving our youth of the lasting standard of the morals and ethics enunciated by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.

Morals are the quarrel we have with behavior. Any system of education which does not inculcate

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men pride, greed, and lust.

We are now living on the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion. It is running out, and we have no other consensus of values to take its place. This is partly because man can now obtain on earth what previously was promised him when he reached heaven.

In our system of society, no authority exists to tell us what is good and desirable. We are each free to seek what we think is good in our own way. The danger is that where men compromise truth and let decency slip, they eventually end up with neither. A free society can survive only through men and women of integrity. Fortunately, there still exist human beings who remain concerned about moral and ethical values and justice toward others. These are the individuals who provide hope of the ultimate realism that is marked by a society's capacity to survive rather than be eventually destroyed.

Ethics and morals are basically individual values. A society that does not possess an ethical dimension will find it almost impossible to draft a law to give it that dimension. Law merely deters some men from offending and punishes others from offending. It does not make men good.

It is important also to recognize that morals and ethics are not relative; they do not depend on the situation. This may be the hardest principle to follow in working to achieve goals. The ends, no matter how worthy they appear, cannot justify just any means. Louis Brandeis, who was deeply convinced of the importance of standards, said: "One can never be sure of ends—political, social, economic. There must always be doubt and difference of opinion." But Brandeis had no doubt about means. "Fundamentals do not change; centuries of thought have established standards. Lying and sneaking are always bad, no matter what the ends."

This is a very enabling statement. Life is not meaningless for the man who considers certain actions wrong simply because they are wrong, whether or not they violate the law. This kind of moral code gives a person a focus, a basis on which to conduct himself. Certainly there is a temptation to let go of morals in order to do the expedient thing. But there is also a tremendous power in standing by what is right. Principle and accomplishment need not be incompatible.

A common thread moves through all the principles I have discussed: It is the desire to improve oneself and one's surroundings by actively participating in life. Too many succumb to the emotional preference of the comfortable solution instead of the difficult one. It is easy to do nothing. And to do nothing is also an act; an act of indifference or cowardice.

A person must prepare himself intellectually and professionally and then use his powers to their fullest extent. This view is well expressed in two extracts from I Ching, the Confucian Book of Changes:

"The superior man learns and accumulates the results of his learning; puts questions, and discriminates among those results; dwells magnanimously and unambitiously in what he has attained to; and carries it into practice with benevolence.

The superior man nerves himself to ceaseless activity."

It is important to be both a thinker and a doer and to have sense of responsibility. A theoretician who has no responsibility is withdrawn from the real world. His recommendations are made in a vacuum. Because he is not required to carry them out, they may be irresponsible and do harm. Similarly, those in charge—the doers—are often devoid of any real thought.

To find a purpose to life, one must be willing to act, to put excellence in one's work, and have concern for what is right ahead of personal safety. Life must be felt, not observed. But to do so means applying oneself to the task daily. Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please—you can never have both."

No professional man has the right to prefer his own personal peace to the happiness of mankind; his place and his duty are in the front line of struggling men, not in the unperturbed ranks of those who keep themselves aloof from life. If a profession is to have its proper place in the further development of society, it must be increasingly dissatisfied with things as they are. If there is to be any exaltation in one's work, one must learn to reach out, not to struggle for that which is just beyond, but to grasp at results which seem almost infinite. As Robert Browning wrote, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a Heaven for."

Man's work begins with his job; his profession. Having a vocation is something of a miracle, like falling in love. I can understand why Luther said that a man is justified by his vocation, for it is a proof of God's favor. But having a vocation means more than punching a time clock. It means guarding against banality, ineptitude, incompetence, and mediocrity. A man should strive to become a locus of excellence.

Most of the work in the world today is done by those who work too hard; they comprise a "nucleus of martyrs." The greater part of the remaining workers' energy goes into complaining. Employees today seldom become emotional about their organizations or its output; they are only interested in making money or getting ahead. And many organizations are killing their employees with kindness, undercutting their sense of responsibility with an ever-increasing permissiveness. This is a fatal error. For where responsibility ends, performance ends also.

"We measure ourselves by many standards," said William James. "Our strength and our intelligence, our wealth and even our good luck, are things which warm our hearts and make us feel ourselves a match for life. But deeper than all such things, and able to suffice unto itself without them, is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth." Man has a large capacity for effort. But it is so much greater than we think it is, that few ever reach this capacity.

We should value the faculty of knowing what we ought to do and having the will to do it. But understanding is easy. It is the doing that is difficult. The critical issue is not what we know but what we do with what we know. The great end of life is not knowledge but action. Theodore Roosevelt expressed this concept well in his "Man in the Arena" statement:

"It is not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong man stumbled or how the doer of deeds might have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred with sweat and dust and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who

place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

The man in the arena has found a purpose in life. He daily experiences Emerson's declaration that nothing is achieved without enthusiasm. He knows that men seldom come within shouting distance of their hopes for themselves. Yet he does not quite in resignation as have those who have taken trouble with nothing except to be born. In his work he is buffeted from two sides, challenged by his own ideas which revolt at the compromises of reality, and assaulted by reality which fights the ideas. He spends himself in that struggle, and he wins by a constant renewal of effort in which he refuses to sink either into placid acceptance of the situation or into self-satisfaction

I believe it is the duty of each of us to act as if the fate of the world depended on him. Admittedly, one man by himself cannot do the job. However, one man can make a difference. Each of us is obligated to bring his individual and independent capacities to bear upon a wide range of human concerns. It is with this conviction that we squarely confront our duty to prosperity. We must live for the future of the human race, and not of our own comfort or success.

For anyone seeking meaning for his life a figure from Greek mythology comes to mind. It is that of Atlas, bearing with endless perseverance the weight of the heavens on his back. —Atlas, resolutely bearing his burden and accepting his responsibility that gives us the example we seek. To seek out and accept responsibility; to persevere; to be committed to excellence; to be creative and courageous; to be unrelenting in the pursuit of intellectual development; to maintain high standards of ethics and morality; and to bring these basic principles of existence to bear through active participation in life—these are some of my ideas on the goals which must be met to achieve meaning and purpose in life.

Admiral Hyman Rickover (1900-1986), the "Father of the Nuclear Navy," was one of the most successful—and controversial- public managers of the 20th Century. His accomplishments are the stuff of legend. For example, in three short years, Rickover's team designed and built the first nuclear submarine—the Nautilus—an amazing feat of engineering given that it involved the development of the first use of a controlled nuclear reactor. The Nautilus not only transformed submarine warfare, but also laid the groundwork for a whole fleet of nuclear aircraft carriers and cruisers (which was also built by Rickover and his team).

The text below is an excerpt from a speech Rickover delivered at Columbia University in 1982, in which he succinctly outlined his management philosophy. His determination, clarity of purpose, emphasis on developing his people, high standards, and willingness to give his people ownership of their work had to have been very inspiring. He had exceptionally high standards and was known to take some of these same strengths to extremes, however, which no doubt led to his reputation in some circles as being difficult to work for. On that cautionary note, GovLeaders.org is pleased to present Rickover's own description of his management style.

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