

"THE BATTLE TO BECOME HUMAN"

INTRODUCTION

"The Measure of a Man's Heart" is the title of an article by Loudon Wainwright that appeared in a recent issue of Life Magazine about Marcel De Rudder. In part it went like this:

"In the last months of his life, when Marcel De Rudder crossed a room, the effort required left him breathless and exhausted. De Rudder is the man who died recently after submitting himself to a surgical experiment in which his seriously damaged heart was connected to a bypass pump....For him, the operation seemed a final hope, and not a very good one at that. Marcel De Rudder had been sick for too long not to have thoroughly studied the realities of life and death...In fact, it appears that De Rudder.....simply wanted some tangible gain to come out of the whole business, and that something didn't really have to be the prolongation of his own life...."

"While De Rudder was waiting to be summoned (for the operation) he spent some time with his pastor, Joseph Seiler. 'He was ready to go to the hospital,' Seiler recalled, 'but he told me he didn't really think Dr. De Bakey could do much for him. He said he was hoping that maybe he could give the doctors some human proof that this would help others. He had the feeling he wouldn't come home alive'"

"On the morning of the operation he lay for some time on a wheeled stretcher outside the operating room....the nurse remembers that he was very alert and seemed considerably less apprehensive than the average patient about what might lie ahead. As the time for the operation grew near, De Rudder stared peacefully at the ceiling or looked on with quiet interest at the swirls of activity increasing around him. In the last moments before the anesthesia removed a consciousness that would never return, Marcel De Rudder watched his life approach its climax and did not shut his eyes."

A BATTLE That last line is an incredible line, "Marcel De Rudder watched his life approach its climax and did not shut his eyes". Somehow you can't help but feel that he won a battle - the only battle that really matters. It wasn't the battle for riches, for De Rudder was poor, an ex-coalminer. It wasn't the battle for a place in the sun, for he wasn't well known or important even in his home town of Westville, Illinois. It wasn't the battle for pleasure, for his life long disability robbed him of that. It wasn't the battle for survival, for all of the knowledge of medical science couldn't keep him alive. He lost every battle that you and I fight so desperately and fiercely to win. He lost every battle except one, and it's the one that really matters. De Rudder won the battle to become a human being. He won the battle to make his life count for something good, he won the battle to become whole, compassionate, brave, honest, the battle to be at peace with himself and the realities of life and death to which he did not shut his eyes.

Now this battle to become human goes on behind the closed doors of every heart. Paul, long ago, referred to this battle in his letter to the Ephesians:

"For our fight" he said, "is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against...potentates of this dark world...Therefore take up God's armor; then you will be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst, to complete every task and still to stand still"

To be sure, Paul exercised poetic license in that language about cosmic powers and the potentates of darkness. But beneath the crust of our sophistication, we have an inkling of what he's pointing to - that darkness in us, around us, that we can't see or fully understand but which keeps oozing out in strange and unpredictable ways to destroy or dehumanize life. It's that irrational element in life, the evil in the world that the world doesn't want, that seduces men to leave mountains of dead at Auschwitz and Hiroshima and Vietnam. Philosophers speak of it as nihilism, naturalists as the law of the jungle, idealists as man's inhumanity to man. It's what we experience when the loaf of bread goes stale, the jug of wine sour, the "Thou" ugly; when on a cloudless day, as if from some cavern in the soul, seep out shadows of disillusion and boredom and cynicism to cut off the sun, and we want to shut our eyes and scream, to flee as from demons unaccountably unleashed from those dark, deep vaults to which we thought they had been consigned forever. Yes....we understand those "potentates" and those "dark powers" of which Paul spoke against which we must continue to do battle to become human, and for that battle, says Paul, we need the whole "armor of God" - beginning with "the belt of truth".

ACCEPT OUR "TRUE" SELF The battle to become human is first the battle to accept our "self". Howard Moody of our own city tells of a teen-ager in a street gang in the city saying in his jazzed up jargon, "Look man...you don't dig my problems at all....like I'm on a big search for me....and nothin ig gonna hang me up 'till I find out". Surprisingly enough, we do dig his problem. It's ours, too, that "big search for me" - for our true self, that is. And we get hung up because we're not sure what it is, or where to look for it...

Remember that oft quoted bit of advice Polonius gives to Laertes in Shakespeare's Hamlet? "To thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou can't not then be false to any man". Good advice, to be sure, until you begin to wonder what it would have meant had Polonius given that advice to Hamlet instead of Laertes. For Hamlet, you're recall, was beside himself....mixed up, that is....the more typical and honest description of a man. So what can that counsel mean to us? How can you be true to yourself if you don't know, to begin with, who your true self is? Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, "Who am I? - this or the other....one person today, tomorrow another.... both at once.....a hypocrite before others....before myself a woe-begone weakling?" Who am I - this is the issue. The little I know about myself or the much I don't know... those irrational drives I try to rationalize but don't really understand. Who am I? What I show to others....or the secrets I withhold from them? - the noble or the base... the kind or the cruel....the compassionate or the killer?

Curiously, the clue is in the confusion. So often the self turns out to be the sum total of reflected appraisals. The "belt of truth" that Paul talks about is God's appraisal of our self which overrules all other appraisals. It is the appraisal of him who alone can search and know and be acquainted with all our ways, and yet who affirms and confirms our true self. God not only bids us to be true to ourselves, but in Jesus Christ he reveals the self to which we are to be true - the self created in his image, the self who is in truth forgiven, valued, loved no matter how guilty or worthless or phoney we or others may judge or feel our "self" to be.

The issue, you see, is not a matter of how we feel about ourselves - for that changes. Rather it is a matter of choosing which self, which appraisal, or whose, is ultimately the true appraisal of who we are, the self we will accept. And this "true self" Biblically speaking is never achieved, but rather it is something given, something received. The "new self" - the "true" self which is God's appraisal of us revealed in Christ is not only a present reality - a gift, but a future possibility, a hope.

Somewhere I read of a baby prince of a royal family being spirited out of Europe at the start of World War I and being reared in the protective anonymity of a peasant family in South America. At the war's end, he was informed that he wasn't who he had thought he was and was told to begin accepting the fact of who he really was. It wasn't easy. He had to rethink, relearn what he had come to believe about himself and his life as the child of a peasant family. It's a parable. The battle to become human is the battle to accept our true self and this is not easy. It involves constant re-thinking, re-learning and re-adjustment. It is the battle to become what we are - sons of a king though we may have thought of ourselves as peasants.

LOYAL TO THIS "SELF" In the second place, the battle to become human involves the battle to be loyal to this "true" self. I think that something like that kind of loyalty is what Paul had in mind when after "the belt of truth" he suggests "for a coat of mail put on integrity". Integrity refers to the state of being whole and undivided. It comes from the same root as the word "integrate" which means to unite or to bring all parts together. Integrity has to do with the principle, the image of your self under which you organize your life and bring its various parts together. To be loyal to our "self" is to live in accord with that true appraisal of God given us in Jesus Christ, to be loyal to it in spite of all the doubts and defeats and discouragements that tempt us to give up.

In another article called "A Brave Self Far At Sea" Loudon Wainwright tells the story of Robert Manry, the Cleveland copyreader who spent 78 days last summer crossing the Atlantic in a sailboat 13 feet long, all by himself. Says Wainwright:

"Manry got this big, scary idea and although he knew a lot of people would find it positively nutty, he believed he could bring it off. Applying his own good sense to the preposterous, he practiced for it on Lake Erie....outfitted his boat....and knowing there would be ideal times at sea, brought along his harmonica. 'There comes a time' Manry's wife quotes him as saying, 'that one must decide, of one's dreams, either to risk everything to achieve them, or to sit for the rest of one's life in the backyard'. Wainwright observes, 'There isn't a word in that statement to suggest that Manry considered anything more important than the fulfillment of his dream'"

Loyalty to our "self" has the same kind of audacity and imagination and determination as Manry demonstrated to realize his dream. The image of our self as "a son of God" made in his image - forgiven, loved, capable of bold creativity, great sacrifice, daring action against great odds - that too is a big and scary idea...a lot of people find nutty. To accept that dream, that image, that Godly appraisal of yourself and to be loyal to it, to make it the organizing principle of your life, the passionate conviction, the ruling force, the burning dream, to act in accord with it is to risk everything for what may seem preposterous. But that's the nature of the battle, the battle to become human and the alternative is figuratively - "to sit for the rest of one's life in the backyard".

Wainwright puts beautifully his reaction to Manry's dream. He writes:

"Manry has given me a wonderful new idea and I'm going to try it out. First I am going to buy a harmonica. Then I am going to take my own boat, which is just about the size of his, out into the ocean. I'll be alone, but I won't be far from land. But I will turn my back on the land and play the harmonica to find out how it feels!"

Maybe that's about all most of us can manage, but it's something - to take our life which is about the size of most, out into the unknown and turn our backs on the safe and the familiar, and try living for a time by our own dream, image, or our true self to see how it works. And maybe, as our little lifeboat is carried out further into the depths of the rough waters, we will become more bold, more loyal to that self we really are, more able to turn away from the continents of hate and prejudice and greed, to become more forgiving as we are forgiven, loving as we are loved, to create music or poetry or justice or brotherhood or whatever with the talent we have been given. Loyalty to self is necessary if we are ever to get launched on anything truly significant in life.

GIVE SELF TO WHOLE HUMAN FAMILY

Finally, the battle to become human is the battle to give our "self" to the welfare of the whole human family. After listing all of "God's armor", Paul sums up the battle this way - "to this end keep watch and persevere....always interceding for all of God's people". The battle is for "all of God's people" - the whole family of mankind. The battle for any one person to become human is never a personal, private war. From the Christian point of view there is no smaller package in the world than a man all wrapped up in himself. So the battle for anyone to become human is the battle for all men to become human. John Donne reminds us of our common humanity in these familiar words:

"Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee".

.....the bell of death, the bell of life - tolls for me, for thee, for every man. So one man left in the darkness of poverty, ignorance, disease, war diminishes me - my humanity, your humanity, our humanity.

Remember those scathing words of Shakespeare in King Henry the V -

"....the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart...
in liberty of bloody hand shall range
with conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
your fresh fair virgins and your flowering infants....."

The point is this: no man can be human with a "conscience as wide as hell". And yet the mind roams over scenes of slums in this city, of shacks in coal regions and delta country, of starving millions in India and China, of mangled bodies in Vietnam, of a man shot in the back by another man this past week on a road in Mississippi - scenes of all the broken, beaten, and oppressed people of this earth mowed down like grass by indifference, prejudice, hostility, greed and somehow those scenes remind us of how inhuman men can be because of a "conscience as wide as hell".

Adlai Stevenson eulogized Eleanor Roosevelt in these words:

"She walked in the slums and ghettos of the world, not on a tour of inspection nor as a condescending patron, but as one who could not feel complacent while others were hungry, and who could not find contentment while others were in distress. This was not sacrifice; this, for Mrs. Roosevelt, was the only meaningful way of life".

The only meaningful way of life. The only way to be completely human. We find meaning and purpose and fulfillment in life not in something we possess, but in some-

thing that possesses us...not in something we have, but in something we give away. "He who loses his life shall find it". The battle to become human: first, we must accept our "true" self - children of God; second, we must be loyal to that self at all times; third, we must give that self to the whole family of mankind. Then it is that we shall be able to watch our life approach climax after climax and not shut our eyes. Then it is that we shall be able, as Paul put it, "To stand our ground and see the salvation of God which he is working in us and through us and for us".

LET US PRAY Lead us, Lord, out of our little lives into the greater world of service and understanding and enjoyment. May we never be satisfied with ourselves, and always reach out to others. We ask this in the spirit of Him who as Love came among us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen