

DIVINE LUNACY

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The year 1995 marked the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. It was a year not only to commemorate a dream, but also to rejoice that in spite of its failures and weaknesses, there is still an organisation in existence that seeks to achieve a world without war. Appropriately, it would seem, in view of the tasks yet to be accomplished, 1995 was also designated the United Nations Year of Tolerance. For tolerance is needed, above all virtues, if we are to live together amicably on this beautiful small planet we call our home.

As nation-states have proliferated since the founding of the UN in 1945, with an increasing number of countries having gained independent status, the ideal of tolerance has had a difficult time. The rise of a kind of ethnic nationalism, coupled with the growth of religious fundamentalism, and often incited to violence by an ever-increasing disparity between the rich and the poor, has strained the concept of tolerance almost beyond the ability of the truly tolerant to act in accordance with its meaning. Waves of senseless violence in so many of the world's cities have nearly drowned out the voices that call for understanding. Age-old and bitter hatreds have been inflamed by ideological arsonists determined to set ablaze even their own lands and communities. The desecration of church, mosque, temple and synagogue in country after country reminds us that religion continues to divide human loyalties, to tear apart the fabric of our most cherished spiritual aspirations.

In such a world, looking at the UN more than fifty years on and recognizing that among its aims, implicit if not explicit in its charter, was the awakening of that spirit of tolerance which was the focus of attention during 1995, what role may the theosophical server play in furthering understanding among peoples and nations? Our question is at heart a simple one: as members of a society committed to the principle of brotherhood, what kind of action is called for today? What, indeed, are the actions supportive of brotherhood? Whether we know it or not, we live out our beliefs, sometimes in subtle and sometimes in not so subtle ways. If brotherhood has become a 'living reality' in our lives, how then do we act?

Without in any way infringing upon or compromising that magnificent freedom which permits and encourages all members of the Society to act upon their convictions in accordance with their own understanding, we may suggest that there is an action which inevitably follows upon knowledge. For as just suggested in relation to our beliefs, the nature of our knowledge will always determine the manner of our action. Whether we will or not, our behaviour reflects the quality of our knowing. We may try to act in accordance with our beliefs; we cannot help but act in accordance with our knowing.

If we really know something (and knowing may be as much visceral as cerebral), that knowledge pervades our very being in such a way that our speech is far less effective than our every action. Communication is always more than verbal interchange. However boldly we may seek to express our principles, it is finally the example of a life lived from a deeper centre than the personal, a life lived in conformity with universal principles of morality; that is more persuasive than either lectures or books. It is one thing to say, even with profound conviction, that all life is essentially unitary with its source; it is quite another to live out that truth in the midst of our daily occupations.

It is not so much a matter of determining, when we awake in the morning, that this day shall be lived in such-and-such a way. Rather it is that, when once we know, beyond all doubt or argument, that every individual – whatever a person's language, the skin pigmentation, the posture of another's worship – is a brother, we can act only in a brotherly manner, with complete tolerance and understanding of the differences we encounter. The action in which the Theosophist is called to engage is, first and foremost, the action of knowing. We are called to know! Tolerance, in fact, is an act of knowing, an act of being.

Such action may not seem to be very active, if we can speak in paradox. It is an action, however, that does not set out to combat anything. Tolerance, like knowing, does not need to combat its opposite, for where tolerance is there cannot be intolerance, just as where knowing is there cannot be 'unknowing'. When one enters a dark room, one does not fight the darkness; one switches on the light. And if there is no electric switch, one can at least light a candle! Combative action may still be necessary to eradicate racial and religious discrimination, but for such action to be truly effective, it must flow from our total being, which is to say from the totality of our knowing. Sri Krishna, in common with every Divine Teacher, did not tell Arjuna what to do; he helped him, rather, to understand, to know, the basis of right action. The decision to act, as well as the decision on how and when to act, must be the disciple's own. The Teacher reveals the multifaceted jewel of truth; from the perception of universals, the disciple is in a better position to determine her own action. When there is right understanding, there must be right action. The individual at peace within becomes inevitably a peacemaker: "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God."

The Greek novelist, Nikos Kazantzakis, writing of the life of St Francis, described the "divine lunacy of freely choosing the impossible" which was the chief characteristic of the saintly monk of Assisi. It is such 'divine lunacy' that is essential for anyone who, knowing fully the far-reaching implications of life's fundamental unity, determines to act at every moment in accordance with that primary fact. To walk gently through the world requires often a greater courage than to curse the unbrotherly, to fight the intolerant. The commitment to tolerance, the commitment to brotherhood is a free choice, and indeed, in today's world it may seem to be choosing the impossible, to be a 'divine lunacy'. Even the Adept Founders of the Theosophical Society spoke of the 'forlorn hope' in describing the attempt to establish a 'universal Fraternity'.

If you have ever looked across a field on a dark night in summer, you may have seen countless small lights flickering momentarily in the grass. Neither so bright nor so constant as the stars above, the feeble lights of a tiny multitude of glow-worms may still illuminate fragmentary patches of the darkness. So in the days of humdrum existence, we may not be called upon to vanquish the darkness of bigotry and prejudice as the sun turns the shadows of night into the full light of day. But in a world in which so many corners are in need of light, even a tiny glow of neighbourliness, of loving thoughtfulness, of patience, courage, tolerance and faith, may serve to diminish the dark around us. If we cannot sustain at every moment the 'divine lunacy' of enduring compassion, we can at least participate in the glow-worm lunacy of trying.