



Hillsdale College Hillsdale, Michigan 49242

a special supplement

6/72

## THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT PERSON

LEONARDE. READ

Dr. Read, founder and president of The Foundation for Economic Education, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, is a noted economist and writer. He delivered this speech at Hillsdale's 120th commencement on June 3, 1972. At the commencement, Dr. Read received Hillsdale's Independence Award from Dr. George Charles Roche III, president.

I am here not to attend your graduation but to share in your commencement. Bear in mind, please, that I am addressing myself to the world's most important person, a point I shall dwell on later.

But first you should know my ideological and philosophical position. As John Ruskin suggested, it is never fair for a speaker to leave an audience in doubt as to where he stands.

I can give you my position by relating a true story. I had been invited to address 200 clergymen at a Monday luncheon in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and that evening in the same community 400 high school teachers. I left New York on an early morning jet for Chicago. Thirty minutes before touchdown the pilot said over the intercom, "This whole area is socked in; we are landing you at St. Louis." Of course, that was 350 miles from Kenosha, making the luncheon engagement impossible and grave doubt could I keep the dinner date. Anyway, at 12:40 P.M. a DC-3 Ozark took off with scheduled stops at Springfield, Peoria, Moline, Rockford, Clinton, Iowa, and Milwaukee.

We landed in Milwaukee at 5:00 P.M. with the fog right down on the deck. A man was waiting and drove me to Kenosha just in time to sit down with the high school teachers. When the emcee stood up to introduce me, he said nothing about me at all but merely berated the weather — "this awful weather our speaker has gone through. . ." Anyway, I began my speech by saying, "Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I would like you to know that I love this weather today. As a matter of fact, I love hot, cold, sleet, snow, rain, hail, fog. This is my way of express-

ing appreciation that God, not the government, is in control of it."

You may wonder why I am here, way out in the future, more than five decades in front of you. To put it briefly, I have traveled a great deal of life's road, the one you are now commencing, and therefore I wish to share with you some of the lessons I have learned along the way.

True, your road will have many zigs and zags different from those I have experienced; nonetheless, there are a few guidelines that are fitting for everyone to observe.

First, do not wait until middle age, as I did, to adopt and live by a basic premise, a fundamental point of reference. Do it right now — at your commencement!

Twenty-five years ago I realized that there was no chance of living the consistent life unless one did his reasoning from a basic premise; and one should not be in my business unless he can be reasonably consistent. Perhaps I did one thing right. I went as deep for my premise as I knew how, because if one does not go deep the premise will serve only shallow and peripheral matters. So I asked myself the hardest question I could think of: what is man's earthly purpose? I could find no answer to that question without bumping head-on into three of my basic assumptions.

My first assumption is founded on an observation, namely, that man did not create himself, for it easily demonstrable that man knows practically

imprimis (im-pri' mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin in primis, among the first (things). . .

IMPRIMIS is the journal from The Center for Constructive Alternatives. As an exposition of ideas and first principles, it offers alternative solutions to the problems of our time.

nothing whatsoever about himself. Therefore, my first assumption is the primacy and supremacy of an Infinite Consciousness.

My second assumption is also demonstrable, namely, the expansibility of the individual human consciousness. While difficult, it is possible to expand one's awareness, perception, consciousness.

I cannot demonstrate my third assumption. I merely know it to be true: the immortality of the human spirit or consciousness, this earthly moment not being all there is to it.

I do not ask that you agree with my assumptions, but if you will concede them then the answer to the question, what is man's earthly purpose, is perfectly simple. It is to see how close one can come during his earthly moments to expanding his own consciousness into a harmony with Infinite Consciousness. Or, in lay terms, to see how close one can come during his earthly moments to a realization of those creative potentialities uniquely his own, all of us being greatly varied in this respect.

What, then, is man's purpose as I see it? It is to grow, emerge, evolve, or to use an expressive term, hatch. Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher, observed "Man is on earth as in an egg." This inspired C.S. Lewis to write, "You cannot go on being a good egg forever. You must either hatch or rot." If adopted, how does one use such a premise? He merely listens to his own or anyone else's ideas, stands the ideas up against his premise, and if they do injury to it or are antagonistic to it, he is, perforce, against them. Or, if, on the other hand, they are in harmony with it, promotive of it, he is, perforce, in their favor. In a word, one's own position can be quickly established once this idea gets to working.

This has had many benefits for me. For instance, I no longer argue with anyone. If you say to me, "Mr. Read, I do not agree with your premise," my reply is, "I could not care less. That is your business, not mine." And if you say, "You are not reasoning logically and deductively from your premise," and you happen to be right, I shall thank you for I do not like to be caught thinking illogically or not deductively from my premise.

The premise serves me even more than this. I no longer engage in philosophical or ideological discussion with anyone unless he is seeking light from me or I from him. And that eliminates a great deal of talk.

I am suggesting that you get for yourself a premise as soon as possible. Let me give you another premise. A scholarly friend of mine gave me a book and insisted that I read it. The title of the book itself would scare one, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* by Immanuel Kant. That philosopher was a pro at being obscure. I read the book and had very little idea of its meaning. Later on I began the writing

of a piece entitled "Importance of the Premise," and half way through a line in the book came to mind. I reread it and on the second reading most of the book tumbled into sense.

Immanuel Kant had a premise that he called "good will." By "will" he did not mean what we mean when we say peace on earth good will toward men. It had nothing whatsoever to do with intentions. By "will" he meant an individual's ability rationally to will his own actions. And the adjective "good" could be used only if one could apply the principle of universality to his maxims. If that line comes through easy to you, I am disappointed in me. I did not know what it meant. But I have learned that if I lean up against a door long enough it will cave in, and I leaned up against that one long enough to clear it of its obscurity.

Let me give you a sample maxim: I have a moral right to my life, my livelihood, my liberty. Is that good? According to Kant, that is good only if you can concede that same right to every other human being—universality. Can I? Yes, I can. Therefore, it is good. Let me reverse the maxim and watch it come through. I have a moral right to take the life, the livelihood, the liberty of another. Is that good? According to Kant, that is good only if you can rationally concede the right of murder, theft, enslavement to every other person on earth. Can I? I cannot. Therefore, it is not good.

Anyway, is it not obvious that with such a premise as Kant's one can be reasonably consistent in his positions, provided he reasons logically and deductively from his premise.

Of course one has to live in the world as it is, but this should not alter one's proclaimed positions. Never approve or condone anything that is not consistent with what you believe to be right: in a word, one's eyes should always be on the search for truth which is possible only as one expands his own consciousness.

Admittedly, expanding consciousness is no simple matter. Indeed, no one can prescribe the technique for another.

Our variation—uniqueness—precludes any fixed formula. Among a few rare individuals it appears to come as easily and naturally as physical growth, but for the most of us this growth requires disciplines and exertions so difficult that acceptance and adoption are often thwarted. However, there are three generalities that apply to all of us:

1. Expanding consciousness is a wholly introspective exercise, that is, concentration on an improvement of the self.
2. It requires a passionate wanting-to-know-it-ness.
3. It demands integrity, an accurate reflection in word and deed of whatever one's highest conscience dictates as right. In a word, go down life's road standing ramrod straight!

The world's most important person is interested in individual liberty, for unless this prevails self-development is restrained. This objective requires a knowledge of what government should and should not do. You have no chance to assist in the advancement of liberty short of knowing where to draw the line between activities appropriate to government and those appropriate to individual choice and decision. In order to know what government should and should not do, you must know what government is and is not.

I have been saying for years that the essential nature of government is organized force. I have been saying it for so long that I had begun to think of the idea as original with me. Several years ago, one of my associates put on my desk a huge tome entitled *The State*. It was written in 1900 and the author was Professor Woodrow Wilson. On page 572 that professor used the same words. He must have been clairvoyant, able to look ahead seventy years and see what I was saying!

It is easy to demonstrate the correctness of Professor Woodrow Wilson's position. The distinction between you as an agent of government and you as a private citizen is as an agent of government you have a constabulary—an organized force—behind you: you issue an edict and I obey or take the consequences. If this organized force be removed from behind you, you are restored to private citizenship: you issue an edict and it has the same effect on me as a resolution of the League of Women Voters. I do as I please!

All I am trying to point out is that the essential nature of government is organized force which I can symbolize by the clenched fist. If you will find out for yourself what this fist can and cannot do, you will have a precise idea as to what government should and should not do.

What can this fist do? I think I know. It can inhibit, restrain, prohibit, penalize. The next logical question is, what in all good conscience should be restrained, penalized, prohibited? The answer to that question comes clear and clean in the moral codes over the millennia, long before Christianity, namely, the destructive actions of men such as fraud, violence, predation, misrepresentation, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal. Force can accomplish this, and this alone. What we have to recognize is that this physical force is definitely not a creative force. The creative force is in every single instance a spiritual force, in the sense that an idea is spiritual; or discoveries, inventions, intuition, insight. Everything by which we live has its origin in the spiritual before he shows forth in the material. For instance, this microphone is inconceivable had not some cave dweller eons ago discovered how to harness fire; and that jet on which I flew here would have been impossible had not some Hindu centuries ago invented the concept of zero. All modern chemistry, physics, astronomy, and the like, are out of the question without the concept of zero. These are impossible accomplishments with Roman numerals.

These spiritual experiences, inventions, insights, intuitions, doubtless number in the trillions since the dawn of human consciousness. You never use physical force to increase them.

All of this is by way of saying that we should confine government to inhibiting the destructive actions of men, and that all creative actions, without any exception whatsoever, should be left to men acting freely, privately, cooperatively, voluntarily, competitively. That is how I draw the line.

Finally, who precisely is the world's most important person?

It's impossible, runs the first reaction, to single out the world's most important person. But on second thought one has the answer: That person is you, whoever you are, wherever you may be, or whatever race, creed, color, or occupation. This is not flattery; it is to remark the obvious, for you are the only person in the world—your world, that is!

In the same sense that "beauty is altogether in the eye of the beholder," so is your world altogether in the eye of you, the beholder. Your world is what you perceive it to be — no more, no less.

If you think of the world as the universe, do you see only twinkling stars, blue skies, and the like? Or do you behold the process of Creation before your very eyes? Radiation? Galaxies racing into an infinite unknown at the speed of light? A mysterious attractive force at work?

If you think of the world as earth, what of earth do you see? Trees, grass, or maybe the soil a plowman scratches? Or mountains, valleys, seas? Or do you perceive the mystery of a sprouting seed shafting itself into outer space? Or roots drinking of nature's bounty, topped by leaves which, in turn, use solar energy to take food from the atmosphere? There is nothing else to your world beyond the capacity you bring to your acts of perceiving. The world flows into your ken through your particular bottleneck, which you have the power to expand or contract.

If you think of the world as Old World and New World, what do you behold? Only the celebrities who featured various periods or wars fought? Or do you perceive the liberating ideas that led from special privilege and the freezing of human energy toward the amazing creativity that flows out of equal opportunity for all? And perhaps the current decadence in ideas and moral scruples that are taking us from the New back toward the Old? Whatever you behold, this alone defines the boundaries of your world. "Knowledge is a mode of being," runs an ancient axiom; what you are defines the limits of what you know.

The idea of my world changed while I was writing the above paragraph as did yours while listening to it. Your world and mine are never identical from one moment to the next. I alone inhabit my world, and you yours. The thought, the concept, the idea is the thing, now and forever, and this, like everything else, is in constant motion.

Aged and well supported is the idea that all reality is in the eye of the beholder, that is, reality is circumscribed by each individual's awareness, perception, consciousness, however correct or faulty it may be. Yet, rarely is this concept employed in what may well be its most effective use: thinking our way into a better relationship with others.

Merely bear in mind that there are as many different worlds as there are human beings and that being human obliges one to live not only with his own world but with many of the other worlds as well. These other worlds are as much a part of the infinitely real as yours; isolation is not a viable prospect. It is conceded that these worlds have a record of conflict, clashing, bumping into each other. But perhaps a slight shift in thinking can lessen this destructive tendency; there may well be a rational basis for more tolerance than is generally practiced.

For instance, would I esteem you less yesterday than today because your world was smaller then than now? To the contrary, your world of yesterday spawned today's broadened perception. Do I not more esteem the inventor than his invention, more respect the perceiver of a thought than the thought itself? Is this a valid way of looking at our relationships? I think so; at least I bear no intolerance toward the less perceptive person I was fifty years ago. So, how can I logically be intolerant of, or unhappy with, those who do not see exactly what I behold? Not a soul on earth who does!

The greatest danger to your world or mine is error for "all error has poison at its heart" and "so long as truth is absent, error will have free play." (Schopenhauer) Clearly, such personal and societal solutions as lie within our reach are the truths we perceive. And this is precisely where our respective worlds can meet to our mutual advantage—provided we seek every means to grow, including tolerance enough to look into every nook and cranny for truth.

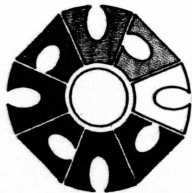
Of course, look to one's peers, sages, seers for truth; but stop not there. Not only from "the mouths of babes" does truth proceed, but on occasion truth flows from those we declare insane. However far that other person's world may seem to be from your own — philosophically, ideologically, religiously, or whatever — be on guard, perhaps, but bend an ear. Truth has a way of seeping through crevices entirely unsuspected. But it is far more likely to enter an open and perceptive mind than one that is closed and intolerant. Indeed, the inquiring mind encourages others to give forth the best that is in them.

By way of example, I have cited from the major work of Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher whose world, in numerous respects, is sharply at odds with my own. However, in his works I find many gems — truths to me. To disregard or fail to embrace them because our worlds do not coincide would, indeed, be error; by such intolerance I would short-change myself, limit my own world.

In any event, you are the world's most important person, and everyone else on earth, whether or not he may realize it, is in need of you at your perceptive best. The enlargement of our respective worlds is the sole means we have of moving toward a more harmonious existence, of cooperating to free, rather than freeze, our perceptions and relationships.

Two additional thoughts that will help along the way:

1. *Never fret about anything that is beyond your power to control.*
2. *If at any time an action is not joyous, more than likely you have made a wrong zig or zag. I wish you as much fun along the way as I am having. This is assured if you will regard each day of your life as commencement. You will then be in tune with the Infinite.*



Center for constructive alternatives

Imprimis is a journal of ideas published regularly by the Center for Constructive Alternatives at Hillsdale College. Through seminars, lectures, debates, panel discussions, publications, and symposia, the CCA, founded by Dr. George Roche, seeks to emphasize, in an academic

setting, the enduring values which underlie a free society. If you would like more information about the CCA and want to receive Imprimis free of charge, simply write to the Center for Constructive Alternatives, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan 49742.