

I AM THE CAPTAIN OF MY SOUL

Those of us who espouse the cause of individual freedom often quote the last stanza of William Henley's poem, *Invictus*:

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments, the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

"I am the captain of my soul." Yes. A ship on the high seas of life symbolizes the individual person and the captain in complete command symbolizes the individual spirit. Yes. I must be the captain of my soul, as all others must be of theirs. Anne Frank is a sublime example.

But Henley's previous line is not true. I am not the master of my fate. I was thrust upon the human scene, and I shall be forcibly taken from it -- both without my consent. I was not consulted on whether my personal consciousness should be human, that of an ant, or that of a tree. Nor did I have any hand in determining whether my consciousness should awaken in the slime of ancient geological seas, in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, in the Dark Ages of Europe, or in our modern age.

Fate has decreed that I emerge on the human scene in our modern day in the United States of America. And looking upon the world scene, I feel as Laurens van der Post, who said in his book, *Venture to the Interior*:

"The world to my mind has never been fuller of finer thinking than it is today...Yet...has there been an age that, considering its lights, has done worse things than this one, with its class hatreds, color prejudice, world wars and concentration camps? Has there been another age that, knowing so clearly the right things to do, has so consistently done the wrong ones?"

Masters?

Living reality has invested its authority in hosts of individuals. Among living things, there is no authority beyond them. There are no masters. For a master is an illusion, the attempted projection of one person's inflated ego upon others.

As those who attempt to be masters try to impose their wills upon others and upon the natural world, sharing and cooperation are frustrated, evolution dammed up until revolution bursts forth, the natural course of events distorted until violence is the only adjustment possible. Aspiring masters invariably dig their own graves, and unfortunately also those of hosts of others and of the environment as well.

Eventually and inevitably the masses have their way. The final authority is the combined power of a majority of individuals, each lending its individual weight in a cooperative force to move the universe.

In human affairs we have a measure of control by cooperating with all other captains. There is something unique about the United States, imperfectly as it functions and blunders along. It has been the model of innumerable other governments around the world and of the United Nations. Ho Chi Minh, the leader of our "enemy" in Viet Nam, ironically was a student and admirer of the United States' form of government.

Perhaps we need:

-- to hear again the rallying cry of Thomas Paine:

"O ye that love mankind! Yet that dare oppose not only tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her a warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."

-- to sound Patrick Henry's expression of the inherent drive of all living things: "Give me liberty or give me death!"

-- to see Ethan Allen after he had captured Fort Ticonderoga without a casualty, confronting the British commandant's question by whose authority he invaded the premises by roaring, "In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress!" (and through the bombast the shimmering image of a *captain of one's soul*).

-- to thrill to perhaps the greatest statement endorsing human freedom ever made, that found in the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness -- That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed."

-- to include oneself in the Preamble to the United States Constitution in that "We, the people of the United States...do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America" -- and also reaffirm the original Bill of Rights for the individual, together with the succeeding 15 amendments.

-- to help lift the torch on the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor by truly feeling Emma Lazarus' inscription on its base:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

-- to put into practice the dedication demonstrated by Clarence Darrow, the great "attorney for the damned," who in his summation of the Labor Case in Chicago in 1920 said:



BY CARL J. NELSON

"I know that the individual that will not stand for his rights will have no rights, and I believe the first duty of every American citizen is to protect himself and his country in all the liberties we have and all we can get....I ask you to say that men shall be free. I urge you to stand for the right of men to think; for the right to speak boldly and unafraid...the right to live free and die free...There is no other cause that is so much worthwhile. There is no other sentiment or emotion that ever moved the human soul as priceless as this."

Innumerable others have spoken as eloquently for the right of each individual to be captain of one's soul.

But in carefully drawing the limits of one's domain at the boundary of one's personal being, how do we combine our powers in a cooperating force? Since one can command only one's own physical person, not that of another, all we can extend beyond ourselves is cooperative goodwill and aesthetic appreciation. We must be poets.

We must feel as Harry Hervey when he wrote:

"They lie over the slope of the earth...Angkor...Penang...Zanzibar...towns whose names call to youth like the notes of a bugle. At sound of them a fever burns the blood, and to the ears (like the voices of a sweet delirium) comes the flapping of canvas and the hiss of foam or the scream of a sou'west gale in the rigging of some shameless wench of the seas. Or more ominous, the beat of drums on some far savage



isle. A few men hear and answer, following a jungle river to its source in mountain fastness or swampy savannah, or dwelling on a lonely coast where infrequently tall spars and royal yards break the monotonous sealine: all urged by a common impulse, half sublime in its grandiose egotism, half ironic in its illusoriness. The others, hearing the call but bound by circumstance, send their dreams after the more tangible fleets; and to them, for the moment, life becomes a sheer and breathless argosy, inflamed by fancies splendidly impossible."

Again, the ship at sea. But in this case it is visiting foreign countries, seeking adventures in the spirit of appreciation. Foreign shores and people are visited in fact or fancy in a spirit of appreciating their individuality, uniqueness, differences, and in that spirit exploitation is impossible. In this spirit each person -- even those intimately related -- is a unique and foreign land, in possession of an authority equal to one's own and savoring a mystery that must be forever unraveled.

It is significant that another internationalist, former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, in a speech in New York in 1953 said:

"In the classical Chinese collection of poetic philosophy...it is said somewhere that whoever wants to grip the world and shape it will fail, because the world is a spiritual thing that cannot be shaped....You cannot grip the world and shape it as a material thing. You can only influence its development if you recognize and respect it as a thing of the spirit."

Nevertheless, "masters" try to grasp a section of society and shape it to their will. But as individuals are squeezed into misshapen and distorted caricatures, eventually violence must explode. As with volcanoes, so with men.

Ah! that would-be dictators might feel as Bhotia Tenzing, the Sherpa who climbed Mount Everest together with Hillary: "To climb Everest...is what I have wanted most of all in my life. Seven times I have tried, I have come back and tried again; not with pride and force, not as a soldier to an enemy, but with love, as a child climbs onto the lap of its mother."

One might echo Martin Luther King Jr., "I have a dream." With dreams we may encompass the earth; but because they are spiritual, dreams cannot be physically coercive. If they are influential it is only because each autonomous physical entity has adopted the dream as its own, even as I have adopted from others, unbeknownst to myself, the dreams I contemplate. If it fits, if it is right, it is mine -- regardless of who may have passed it on.

And if need be, in the spirit of Don Quixote, it may be an impossible dream. Others will winnow the wheat from the chaff -- and which is which, each must answer for oneself.

My dream assures me that this is my home, the earth -- born of the ceaseless ebb and flow of eternity; born of the patient gathering of atoms and of speeding rays of light by the arching arms of the mother universe; born of the swirl of galaxies, of flaming comets, of slumbering nebulae. This is my home, the earth, clinging to the skirt of the sun as it pirouettes on its axis.

In the childhood of my larger self, I rose from the sleep in the sea and the saltiness of the ocean still flows in my blood. I have no memory of where I was before I awakened. I wandered from room to room in my earth home, an orphan, puzzled myself from the fearful forces I did not understand. In my younger years I worshipped idols in ancient Chaldea, shook rattles to the beat of drums in the Congo, carved totem poles on the Pacific coast of North America. In my youth I built pyramids in Egypt, constructed churches with crosses in them in Europe, revered my ancestors in China, and raised huge statues in India to remind me of the way of Buddha.

Also in my youth I ravaged the steppes of Asia with Genghis Khan, ruthlessly slaughtered Indians with Cortez in Mexico, and shattered whole cities with the armies of many nations just a few years ago. But I had compunctions, for I healed my self-inflicted wounds with Florence Nightengale, Walt Whitman, Clara Barton, Louis Pasteur, Jonas Salk.

I am black, white, and yellow. I have listened to the crash of surf on shores dotted with umbrellas of palms; I have heard the crackle of frost in arctic cold; I have exulted on mountain tops; and I have ridden through waving grass of prairies.

I am a paradox. I have been inhuman in the Spanish Inquisition, ignorant in my treatment of the discoverers of knowledge, and despotic in Hitler's Germany. But I have broadened my compassion with Lincoln, deepened my understanding with Einstein, and increased my sensitivity with the music of Beethoven and the poetry of Gibrán.

I have been a long time in gathering shape and being. And since all of the existence both past and present has contributed to what I am, in a sense of respect and of gratitude may I be gentle, understanding, generous, humane, forgiving -- befitting one who is truly a child of the universe.

Carl Nelson once lived in Cannon Beach. He is the author of *THIS GREAT BAZAAR*. This article originally appeared in the NCTE in January 1984.

BUffOOnaTics

Creative Costume Services

Gary Brownrigg

P.O. Box 1091
Astoria, Oregon 97103

BUFFOONAGRAMS
For all Occasions

(503) 861-2920 Office
861-0807 Home

HOPE L. HARRIS

LICENSED
MASSAGE
THERAPIST

503-325-2523

