

## “Reverence for Life”

There are some figures who belong not to any one country or culture but to the world at large. Some are mystics and prophets like Francis and Gandhi, some are musicians like Bach and painters like Picasso, others scientists like Jane Goodall, still others outstanding for their altruism. They seem to transcend their particular time and place and in their differing ways show us glimpses of the good, the true and the beautiful. And it would be rare indeed to find one individual who combined every form of genius—at once spiritual and scientific, both an artist and a humanitarian. Yet one man, Albert Schweitzer, fit that description.

He was born in Alsace, on the border region of Germany and France, the son of a Protestant pastor. And from the time of his birth in 1875, he was given to an exceptional sensitivity toward the feelings of others. "As far back as I can remember," he recalled in his memoirs, "I was saddened by the amount of misery I saw in the world around me. Youth's unqualified *joie de vivre* I never really knew." As the son of a pastor, he was far from rich. The house was often damp and cold. The boy at times had to wear his one thin summer suit through the long, bitter winter. And on the church stipend her husband earned, Albert's mother could only afford to offer the children two large bowls of gruel for the meals each day. But at least they had a home and food on the table. "One day on the way home from school, I had to wrestle with George Nitschelm, who was bigger than I, and was supposed to be stronger, but I got him down," Albert remembered. "While he was lying under me, he jerked out, 'Yes if I got broth to eat twice a week, as you do, I should be as strong as you are!' I staggered home, overcome by this finish to our play," smarting under the awareness that as the preacher's boy, he occupied a privileged rung on the social ladder.

After that, the youngster began to consciously share in the deprivations of his playmates. "I had been given an overcoat made out of an old one of my fathers," but knowing that no other village boys had warm coats, Albert refused to wear the winter garment even when his father boxed his ears. Other children didn't have leather boots, so Albert insisted on wearing wooden clogs also, as well as gloves with no fingers. In part, he simply wanted to fit in, to be like his companions. But it was more than avoiding the stigma of being different. From the earliest age, he was finely tuned to the world around, to its beauty as well as sorrow.

His receptivity showed in a passion for music. In second-grade, the instructor who taught penmanship also gave singing lessons to the older students. One day in the infant school, Albert stood outside the classroom waiting for his lessons while the chorus inside finished their rehearsal. "When they began the vocal duet," he says, "I had to hold onto the wall to prevent myself from falling. The charm of the two-part harmony thrilled me all over, to my very marrow, and similarly the first time I heard brass instruments playing together I almost fainted from excess of pleasure." By age five, he was at the keyboard, and playing the organ before his feet could reach the pedals.

If a musical chord set him ringing, life's dissonant notes left him jarred and shaken, especially the discord of violence inflicted on the innocent. "One thing that specially saddened me was that the unfortunate animals had to suffer so much pain and misery," he reminisced. "The sight of an old limping horse, tugged forward by one man while another kept beating it with a stick to get it to the knacker's yard, haunted me for weeks. It was quite incomprehensible to me—this was before I began going to school—why in my evening prayers I should pray for human beings only. So when my mother had prayed with me and had kissed me good-night, I used to add silently a prayer that I had composed myself for all living creatures. It ran thus: 'Oh, heavenly Father, protect and bless all things that have breath; guard them from all evil, and let them sleep in peace.'" A little older, Albert twice tried fishing with rod and line when the other boys invited him along, "but this sport was soon made impossible for me," he relates, "by the treatment of the worms that were put on the hook for bait, and the wrenching of the mouths of the fishes that were caught. I gave it up," he concludes, "and even found courage enough to dissuade other boys from going."

Albert was obviously a thoughtful child who raised questions that sometimes made his friends and even older adults uncomfortable. "When I was eight my father, at my request, gave me a New Testament, which I read eagerly," he recounts. "Among the stories which interested me most was that of the Three Wise Men from the East. What did the parents of Jesus do, I asked myself, with the gold and other valuables which they got from these men? How could they have been poor after that? And that the Wise Men should never have troubled themselves again about the Child Jesus was to me incomprehensible. The absence, too, of any record of the shepherds of Bethlehem becoming disciples, gave me a severe shock." As doubtless his Sunday School teachers were also shocked by such precocious and unusual ponderings.

The bright boy grew to be a brilliant youth. By the time he was thirty he was the head of a theological seminary with doctorates in religion and philosophy, the author of a landmark volume on *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* as well as book length treatments of Bach in German and French, quickly gaining an international reputation for his mastery of the organ, as both musician and instrument-builder. Schweitzer was pushing himself at a phenomenal pace, pouring a lifetime of achievement into three decades, knowing that his time was limited. For at the age of twenty-one, the young man had made a solemn vow. Waking from a restful sleep at his home in Gunsbach, with sunlight streaming through the open windows and sounds of birdsong on the wind, he asked himself what he had done to deserve such good fortune, to be blessed with such robust physical health, so much intellectual vigor, such raw talent? At that moment, on the cusp of manhood, he had sworn to spend nine more years, until the age of thirty, pursuing his personal interests as a scholar and artist, then to give himself over entirely to the service of humanity

Medicine became the medium as on his 30th birthday he embarked on eight more years of study to equip himself for Africa. As a doctor, he said, he could do more and talk less. And he realized that the Paris missionary society sending him to the French colony of Gabon would only tolerate him if he kept his mouth shut. He could never be

an evangelist or preaching missionary. For although Schweitzer understood the extraordinary self-sacrifice he was making as a form of obedience to the teachings of Jesus—"whoever shall save his life shall lose it for my sake"—other Christians looked at him askance.

In his years of Biblical research, Schweitzer had come to the conclusion that Jesus was a fallible human being, not a God-Man living on the plane of timeless truth, but a product of his history and culture. Jesus was above all an apocalyptic prophet, a messianic Jew who believed God's righteous kingdom was about to arrive on earth, but who was clearly mistaken in predicting a speedy end to the world. His words couldn't be taken *verbatim*. And what Jesus believed long ago, in a pre-scientific era, couldn't and shouldn't be the measure for our own understanding of the world.

Schweitzer's study of medicine only confirmed his devotion to gathering insight through observation and experiment rather than referencing revelation. In contrast to the church, where doctrines could be endlessly disputed, at medical school he found himself "among men who took it as a matter of course that they had to justify with facts every statement they made." Chemistry, physics, botany, zoology, all subjects where exactitude reigned, left him thrilled with the certainty of knowledge they offered. Yet like so many thinkers of the modern world, Schweitzer wondered where the bridge could be found between science and the humanities, between facts and values, between physical laws and moral laws, between the head and heart.

The answer came just two years after he'd arrived in Africa, on a hot summer's day as he journeyed upstream along the river from Cape Lopez to N'gomo to treat the wife of another missionary who's fallen ill. Lost in thought aboard the slow moving barge, Schweitzer in his autobiography says he was searching for the universal conception which could finally join reason with religion. He was baffled, covering pages of his notebooks with disconnected musings. "Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase 'Reverence for Life.'"

*Erhfurcht vor dem Leben*. The German phrase that became his touchstone means "reverence for life," but more than that, too. *Erfurcht* has connotations of amazement, awe, and soul-stirring power. So that to behold the world and its creatures with real reverence is to be transformed by the vision—transformed from indifference to compassion, to become a co-participant in both the travail and holiness of the earth. Ethics had previously been concerned exclusively with how we treat other people. But now, inspired by the profusion of the primeval forest, the grace of the heron rising from the reedy bank, the baby monkeys and pelicans he befriended and tamed as pets, the mystery of the traveler ants in their relentless marches across the jungle floor-- Schweitzer sought to widen the circle, believing that only a morality based in nature could meet the needs of an evolutionary, ecological age. He wrote,

A tree grows, bears fruit—then, after a certain time, it no longer grows, it loses its leaves, its branches wither. What happens? Why is the energy checked? Because it did not

sink deep enough roots into the earth on which it stands. Anyone who has to do with trees knows what I mean. The same thing—I thought to myself—has happened with us humans. Humanity has not had deep enough roots. It has not found sustenance and fresh impetus, because the ethical code on which it was based was too narrow and did not have a deep foundation. It has concerned itself only with human beings. It has given only a passing nod to our relationship with other living creatures, looking upon it as a nice bit of sentimentality, quite innocuous but of no great significance. But it did have significance. For only if we have an ethical attitude in our thinking about all living creatures does our humanity have deep roots and a rich flowering that cannot wither.

Only a philosophy grounded in life could truly serve life. So when Rachel Carson dedicated her book *Silent Spring* to Dr. Schweitzer in 1962, just three years before his death, she called him “the one truly great individual our modern times have produced.” In his calls for an end to atmospheric nuclear testing, for which he received the Peace Prize, Schweitzer was like Carson herself, who warned again poisoning nature, both forerunners of the modern environmental movement.

Schweitzer ended his years at the hospital in Lambarene where he had spent the better part of his life fighting leprosy and malaria, dysentery and elephantiasis and other tropical diseases. During many of those years, including a term served in wartime detention, he was joined by his wife Helen Bresslau, who trained as a nurse to assist in his work. The facility they began as a corrugated iron rectangle, 26 feet long and just half as wide, topped with a roof of palm leaves, is now a hospital that sees 50,000 patients a year with units for pediatrics, maternity, and all the other specializations of modern medical care.

But in the end, Schweitzer remained modest about his accomplishments. Not everyone, he counseled, had the resources he'd been given to sacrifice and serve on such an heroic scale. Yet all could make a difference. “Whatever more than others you have received in health, natural gifts, working capacity, success, a beautiful childhood, harmonious family circumstances, you must not accept as being a matter of course,” he suggested. “You must pay a price for them.”

Open your eyes and look for a human being, or some work devoted to human welfare, which needs from someone a little time or friendliness, a little sympathy, or sociability, or labor. There may be a solitary or embittered man, an invalid or an inefficient person to whom you can be something. Perhaps it is an old person or a child. Who can enumerate the many ways in which that costly piece of working capital, a human being, can be employed. Search, then, for some investment for your humanity.

Each of us has our own Lambarene. So far as we have been touched by the sense of reverence, each of us can be a servant of life.