

The Importance of Obligation

Dave Head

Dull, cold, and comfortless, the day seemed to take on the darkness of shadows from passing clouds and give a feeling of ominous might to the reality of nature. I was completely alone, except for my dog, as I walked to the woods behind my country house that day. It was spring; the trees had filled with green and the entire woods was a mass of odors. The sweet yet sour odors, mixed together, seemed to present the organic truth of nature, like the reality of life's sweet and sour, which is often hard to take, but which constitutes the truth none-the-less. It was because I had been doing some deep thinking that I had gone to the woods that day. I wanted to be alone, to think about many things which had been bothering me, and the woods was always my favorite place to go.

Although wearing only a thin coat I never noticed the cold, nor was I concerned by the rain which began seeking pathways down through the branches overhead. Seeking to be alone, I had, by what psychologists call the act of expansion, made the small woods into a large forest. Walking in endless circles, crossing the same fence at different points, emerging into a low pasture from a new direction each time, I finally sought to be even more alone. Remembering a giant, hollow tree I soon found myself in it, protected finally from the sight and even sound of passing automobiles on a nearby highway. Now I was enclosed, at last, surrounded by four walls of solid wood, and sheltered from the rain, which still fell outside. I thought of the tree, of how it must have been home to countless squirrels, racoons, birds, and insects—an exclusive motel for a myriad of nature's transient guests. Like me, they would live for a period of time upon this earth and then be gone; the thought struck me suddenly.

I dug into the soft earth of the floor of the tree's hollow abdomen and my hands brought up shells. To find shells—skeletons of once-living aquatic animals—in the earth of a central Indiana wood seemed an absurdity, but I knew that ages ago the place could have been a lake, or even a sea, and that now I held souvenirs of creatures even more primitive than the squirrels or insects. But they all had made this tree, or this area of earth, their home, even as I now made a resting place. I was somehow translated by the thoughts of my mind into a belief that the falling of rain, the coldness of air, even the

appearance of a thousand snail shells, was only an illusion, only an analogue to the natural course of events and the pattern of thought which must, or should at one time run through the mind of every young person when he begins to realize something called obligation.

I thought about a young man—a boy who was always rather shy and sensitive; one who, having a great many ideas, and sure in his belief, had nevertheless drifted through seventeen years of life without seeing any clear purpose, or creating any true direction from all he had ever felt, thought, or learned.

This young man had once heard someone say: "Commercial artists make a lot of money," and the idea had been pleasing to him. During the summer between his junior and senior years in high school he had enrolled in a summer course at an art institute. Sketching and sizing up proportions of obese nude models, he felt he was nearing the reality of worthy accomplishments and that no further goal was to be sought. But one hot summer day, as he sat upon the floor of the art institute and sketched hanging drapery, he was given a sudden insight into the truth. Beside him a girl, a fellow student, also sat, and together they talked, sketched drapery, and smoked endless cigarettes. Then the instructor came by and said, "My! I'd say you two needed an ash can." Perhaps the words were insignificant, but suddenly as he looked over the floor at the numerous cigarette butts and at the face of the laughing girl, he was struck with the absurdity of his situation. "What am I doing here?" he asked himself. The only answer he could give to himself was "nothing." And upon asking himself the question "What is money?" he would not be able to answer but would later come to think of money as being like the food a snail or squirrel eats. Food will feed snails and squirrels, and money can let a man live, can buy food which will let blood pulse through his body until the day he dies and his organic self rots away. But he felt that mankind should be something more than a snail, something more than an animal or a piece of vegetation. There was an obligation which each man had to his fellow man, an obligation which this young man was beginning to feel.

As I sat in the hollow of the tree on that spring day I turned my thoughts from that young man, and began to think about an old man, to whom the young man had a deep obligation. Moving as rapidly as the falling rain outside my wooden chamber, time seemed to me to be a dreadful enemy, and a thief who would not hesitate to take away from one's life anything he could lay his cold fingers upon. "Would it

not be my own heinous crime," I thought, "if I should let time steal from me, even as he has taken from me before? And if I, ignoring the old man I am to someday become, should not use every moment and every day to their fullest worth, shall I not be aiding time in that robbery of a poor old man? Will not that old man, someday sitting in a silent and almost visionless world, look out through his milky eyes at a spring day and wish, with much sadness, that he had walked more often in appreciation when he had had the body and the senses of a youth? And more important, would he not deeply regret, in the smallness of an aged man's capacity to do any good, or even evil, to his fellowman, if he had neglected as a youth a thousand opportunities and a thousand obligations to help others?" If only for the sake of an old man's conscience, the importance of the obligation could no longer be denied in my mind.

The importance of an obligation can make many changes in one's life. The young man, having realized he wanted to go to college in the fall, but that coming from a poor family he would need money, was given strength, in the strength of his obligation, to find ways and means. Always weak, he received strength to work that summer as he had never worked in his life. He, who once read Professor Van Loon's three-inch thick volume, *The Arts*, for the simple enjoyment of it now sweated as a laborer on a construction crew. He, who had once been in love and had written sonnets, now dug a ditch and paid respect to his foreman—a man who could neither read nor write his own name. He, who once lazed away summer afternoons sketching old women, and telling lies to a girl he would never meet again, found himself sitting atop a 70-foot steel tower on a windy summer day and thanking God he was a Christian, just in case he did fall.

The kid loved his ice-cream cone,
But it melted
Before he could eat it.

Jerry Frederick