

NICHOLAS ROERICH (1874 - 1964)

October 8, 1964

by

Sina Fosdick

Ninety years ago, almost to a day, a great soul was born who was destined to become the embodiment of the most noble ideals in life. In his vast creativity as a painter, writer, poet, scientist and explorer, there was an ever-present understanding of human nature and a desire to help mankind on many paths. In the West he was known as a great humanist; and in the East they knew him as a great Rishi, a Guru, and also the "Master of the Mountains." No one painted the Himalayas as he did - their majesty, beauty and greatness. No one captured the eternal peace and feeling of infinity which symbolize the Himalayas as he did. The paint brush and the living word were his mighty tools. His was the fiery gospel of beauty, but blind are those who see in Roerich a painter alone, for he was one of the greatest spiritual leaders of our era.

"Not of historical places do I speak. Not of the monuments of antiquity. Let the museum be a museum. And let life be life. Now it is not necessary to think of the past. Now - the present, which is for the great future. And I tell you more: Remember, now the time of the harmonization of our inner spiritual centers has approached. This condition will be the cornerstone in the struggle with 'Mechanical civilization,' which is sometimes erroneously called culture." The Scholar Annual, 1933, p. 16

In reminding the world about "what is happening and what is imperatively needed," he said, "How many young hearts seek the beautiful and the true." He pointed out constantly the principles of unity, clarifying them in everyday life. And as the most essential, he called to joy - joy of labor, joy of beauty, joy of knowledge, joy of the future. For he was building for the future with daily attainments. To say that Roerich was abstract in his calls, addresses, and summons, would be equal to saying that the stars are abstract! He was a great realist and also a "practical idealist," as he spoke of himself.

Let us harken to his own words about how to bring the above-mentioned values into life.

"Create, create and create! Create in daytime, create at night; for creation in thought is as essential as our physical expression....When a person 'climbs' to the Light,...his 'I' is changed into the conception of 'We.'"

"....one can hear at present disgusting cries: 'Down with culture,' 'Down with heroes,' 'Down with teachers.' It is a shame on humanity, but such outcries of crass ignorance one witnesses even nowadays...." Beautiful Unity, p.2,3

"...it is always timely to speak of the growth of spiritual creative power and to lay stress upon collecting and preserving, but this is especially needed when evolution passes through difficult moments and one does not know how to solve the actual accumulated problems. To solve them, however, is possible only in spirit and in beauty." Ibid., p.9

"Not once did we speak about the introduction in school of a chair of ethics of life, a course of the art of thinking." Ibid., p.20

To Prof. Roerich, "the education of good taste is the most vital principle of life." He saw in it "a symbol of refined and expanded consciousness." He spoke of "Culture, in which the heart and spirit act." "The education of good taste cannot be something abstract. Above all this is a vital attainment in all spheres of life..." Ibid., pp. 23-4

Insisting untiringly on the eternal values which are the cornerstones of evolution, he designated education of the spirit, and heroism as the leading paths.

"Culture - the veneration of Light - rests on the cornerstones of Beauty and Knowledge." "Beauty and Knowledge are the basis of the entire culture and these are changing the entire history of humanity. This is not a dream. We can prove it through the entire history....Books are true friends of humanity and each human being is entitled to have these noble possessions. In the East, in the wise East, a book is the most precious gift." (Ibid., pp.35,38-40) Prof. Roerich recalls that during his five-year expedition in Asia, he saw innumerable libraries in each monastery, in every temple, even in a ruined Chinese watchtower. He speaks of "a lonely traveler in the mountains" who has a book in his knapsack.

And now we come to the concept of the Guru - the Teacher. "Once in Karelia I sat on the shores of Lake Ladoga with a farm lad. A middle-aged man passed us by, and my small companion stood up and with great reverence took off his cap. I asked him, 'Who was this man?' And with special seriousness the boy answered, 'He is a teacher.' I again asked, 'Is he your teacher?' 'No,' answered the boy, 'he is the teacher from the neighboring school.' 'Then you know him personally?' I persisted. 'No,' he answered with astonishment. 'Then why did you greet him with such

reverence?' Still more seriously my little companion answered, 'Because he is a teacher.' Himavat, p.101

Many episodes of a similar nature were related by Prof. Roerich. Especially touching were the stories about his own teacher in painting, Prof. Kuindji. From a simple shepherd boy in the Crimea he became a highly esteemed artist, a great teacher of painting and a real Guru to his pupils.

This took indomitable courage. He had to surmount many obstacles, suffer hunger and want until he became an almost legendary figure in the world of art. His own life was an ever-living example to young students and he left a profound impression on the spirit of young Roerich who spoke later of Kuindji as an ideal teacher, who used his authority when needed.

Dr. Radhakrishnan, the eminent scholar and philosopher, who is the President of India, once said about Prof. Roerich, "India and the world will not forget his services." This spirit of service to mankind is the keynote of the entire life of Prof. Roerich. He himself said, "The evolution of the New Era rests on the cornerstone of knowledge and beauty." Memorial Volume, pp.12,14

How did Prof. Roerich introduce the Teaching of Living Ethics into life? By personal example, with word and action, by the emphasis on ethics without compromise, on purity of thought and clarity of purpose. In his article "Adamant" we read: "You say: 'Life is hard. How can we think of knowledge and beauty if we have nothing to live on?' ...But I say: 'You are right, but you are also wrong. Knowledge and art are not luxuries. Knowledge and art are not idleness....They are prayer and the work of the spirit....men pray in moments of great difficulty. So, too, is this prayer of the spirit most needful, when one's whole being is shaken and in want of support, and when it seeks for a wise solution. And wherein lies the stronger support?...We tremble because of the vacillation of our spirit; because of distrust, because of unfounded expectations....Of what does the great wisdom of all ages and all nations speak? It speaks of human spirit. Penetrate in thought into the deep significance of these words and into the meaning of your life. You know not the limits to the power of the spirit. (Emphasis added, S.F.) You do not know over what impassable obstacles your spirit bears you, but some day you shall awake, unharmed and everlastingly regenerated. And when life is hard and weary, and there seems to be no way out, do you not feel that some helper, your own divine spirit, is speeding to your aid?...An arduous trial awaits the whole world: the trial by assimilation of truth...But this test is more severe than the trials of antiquity. Prepare to achieve!...Meanwhile have care for everything that serves to advance the perception of truth...." Beautiful Unity, pp.55-8

Throughout his entire life his calls to unity of nations, peoples, leaders and groups devoted to cultural pursuits, were without end. In personal contacts, lectures, books, numerous articles, he stressed unity as the major factor of existence, affirming its need for the human heart. He linked unity and culture together. He said: "If you shall be asked, of what kind of country and of what a future constitution you dream, you can answer in full dignity: The country of Great Culture shall be your noble motto. You shall know that in that country will be peace where knowledge and beauty are revered."..."More knowledge! More art! There are not enough of these bases in life, which alone can lead us to the golden age of unity." Ibid., pp.49-50,54

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There is a deep inner feeling in the utterances of this great soul who brought truth into reality in his own life and taught many others to live it.

Let the words of the Living Ethics bring our tribute to him at the 90th Anniversary of his birth. For he lived these words.

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