

Keeping the Flame Alive

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“Theosophy ... is the fixed eternal sun, and its Society an evanescent comet trying to settle in an orbit to become a planet, ever revolving within the attraction of the sun of truth.” — H.P. Blavatsky

Our society completed an extraordinary century and a quarter of existence on 17th November 2000, a milestone of no small import. Milestones may be disregarded by some as belonging to a world dominated by parameters such as time. However, they can be a most valuable juncture for an organisation such as ours to assess its worth and integrity, its inherent usefulness or otherwise in the world and, most importantly, its usefulness to the work of the Great Ones who originally inspired the formation of the Society. If asked, probably each and every member of this organisation would have a different perspective on the TS and its future, a Society which is small in terms of the planet's total population yet substantial in terms of its effect upon world thought. A few ideas are presented here.

Let us briefly reconsider the reasons for the formation of The Theosophical Society, which will be taken up again later. Madame Blavatsky made a beautiful statement when she wrote about Theosophy and The Theosophical Society:

Theosophy is divine nature, visible and invisible, and its Society human nature trying to ascend to its divine parent. Theosophy ... is the fixed eternal sun, and its Society an evanescent comet trying to settle in an orbit to become a planet, ever revolving within the attraction of the sun of truth. It was formed to assist in showing to men that such a thing as Theosophy exists, and to help them to ascend towards it by studying and assimilating its eternal verities.

[The Key to Theosophy]

The aims of the TS have been further clarified in the Three Objects which are well-known to members.

Taking Stock of The Society's Strengths and Weaknesses

A stocktake of our Society demands consideration of its credits and debits, its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it is not healthy to view the Society through unduly rose-tinted glasses; on the other hand, excessive criticism (which occurs at times) without acknowledging the strong points of the TS could create an overly gloomy scenario which is not necessarily accurate either. Therefore, let us firstly consider the most significant strengths of our organisation:

- Our Objects, the first one in particular, provide a superb background for the canvass of the work in progress, which is the work of our Society. The formation of ‘a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of humanity’ is a noble cause, the fruition of which may take considerable time to come.
- The active encouragement of *Freedom of Thought* as outlined in the 1923 resolution by the General Council means that members are granted full freedom of thought and can interpret theosophical teachings as they see fit, while allowing that same freedom to others. Given the breadth and depth of the body of theosophical teachings, this allows a great deal of latitude and potentially open, wide-ranging and lively discussions at our meetings on the Wisdom teachings.
- Following on from the previous point, the Society does not officially align itself with any other organisation. This is a strength because it does not impose specific standpoints on members and upholds the right of each member to pursue Truth in his or her own way. Organisational non-alignment does not mean that theosophists do not care about what goes on in the world. We may possess *neutrality* as an organisation but our members are perfectly free to be involved individually with other organisations and causes.
- The Ancient Wisdom teachings which Madame Blavatsky brought to the world in a modern form late last century, and which underlie the various religious traditions, contain a *rich selection of subjects* for members to study and contemplate in our many centres. This helps determine and shape the character of the Society’s work.
- The outlook of the TS is essentially *ethical* and what one might call ‘other based’, resting on those fundamental principles which lie at the heart of the world’s great spiritual traditions. Ethics are central to the Wisdom Tradition for HPB described Theosophy, fundamentally, as altruism. Altruism means ‘regard for others as a principle of action’ or unselfishness.
- Theosophical teachings can be made extremely practical. It is possible to apply the great Fundamental Propositions mentioned in *The Secret Doctrine* in all spheres of life – atomic, personal, global and universal.

Several weaknesses of The Theosophical Society also come to mind, things which we may not wish to think about but which are crucial to the Society’s future:

- First and foremost, it is a sad but true fact that the members of The Theosophical Society are all too human. Just because we have a high ideal of brotherhood does not automatically mean that people suddenly change various ingrained habits upon joining the TS. Personal effort is necessary in order to curb what is often a natural tendency towards competition, the desire for influence and position. ‘Harmony in diversity’ might be an appropriate goal for us to strive for within our many centres.
- There is a tendency in some quarters to theosophical fundamentalism. This results in what one might call ‘exclusivism’ which is anathema to the very nature of true theosophical study, and can and does lead to unnecessary division. Our differences are in fact a great strength; they should enrich, not separate.

- One hears comments among theosophists at times which imply that The Theosophical Society has an exclusive monopoly on the Wisdom teachings and that we are the 'chosen' vehicle of the Mahatmas. The Society was a chosen vehicle for their work at the time of its formation. Furthermore, it was made very clear in *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* that the Great Ones support *any* great humanitarian movement. The Theosophical Society will only be a vehicle for their work as long as its members continue to work together in a genuine spirit of cooperation and as long as the Society's orientation remains altruistic in nature. It is inappropriate and even detrimental to sit on our laurels and assume that the Mahatmas are with us forever, or that most of the work has already been done.
- In some places there seems to be a tendency for the Society to become insular and almost fade into the background, without a noticeable or even very definite presence. This might be necessary in countries where the political situation is difficult but not in general.
- The character of the TS can become blurred if we do not carefully consider our purpose and follow this through in our Lodge activities.

The Need for The Theosophical Society

The need for The Theosophical Society is surely as strong now as it was late last century. While more people are familiar with the Ancient Wisdom, particularly in the West, the world's population has increased substantially since the Society's formation and materialism is alive and possibly stronger now than it was then. In fact, modes of modern communication (for example, the cinema, advertising and the Internet) have by and large strengthened its hold, despite also being used by people and organisations with genuinely altruistic messages. Various New Age movements also have materialistic overtones. A Society such as ours still has a necessary place, in fact a crucial one, in world thought. To return to Blavatsky's purpose for the formation of the TS, it seems an ongoing necessity for us to continue to remind humanity that such a thing as Theosophy exists. So many more souls are now in incarnation compared with a century and a quarter ago. However, reminding humanity is only the first step for it is only when put into practice that Theosophy becomes a truly vital force. Technical Theosophy is one thing, but living Theosophy quite another. When enough humans actively infuse their lives with Wisdom, only then may there no longer be such a strong need for an organisation such as ours.

Will the TS Continue to Exist?

At the time of its inception, The Theosophical Society was a lighthouse for a world afflicted by materialism and a preoccupation with spiritualistic phenomena. Through Co-Founder Madame Blavatsky, the TS was primarily responsible for bringing Eastern spiritual teachings to the West. What of the world today? A pseudo-spiritual/occult/New Age supermarket is reflected in thousands of organisations and methods for developing psychic development, inner power, enlightenment and so forth. It has been said that we are in the midst of a psychic epidemic today. With this vast array of choices, what of the TS? Will it continue to exist in the near future and for decades and centuries to come? This would seem perfectly possible, for the TS is uniquely placed to preserve and make

known a Wisdom tradition which has been handed down the centuries by some truly enlightened souls, due to the strong foundations laid by our early leaders. However, in order for the Society to continue to exist and not compromise its *raison d'être*, the following essential requirements need to be met:

- Firstly, an *inner inspiration* needs to be maintained in order for the Society to remain alive and well, and for the Ancient Wisdom teachings to remain a fertile ground for Self-discovery. The teachings include a great principle – that everything in the universe occurs from within outwards. On this basis, it can readily be appreciated that the inner heart, the soul of this organisation, must be kept alive if the parts of its physical ‘body’ are to continue to be healthy well into the future. I believe it is essential to remember the qualities of the Great Ones in whose footsteps we follow. They represent, among other things, the purest compassion, enquiring minds, dauntless courage and an absence of self. To many theosophists, their very existence shows that there is a way ahead for each of us. This thought can become a wonderful beacon of inspiration. To the extent that each member finds an inner oasis of inspiration which will not run dry even in the midst of difficult periods, our Society will be fuelled accordingly. This inspiration may be derived from the Masters of Compassion, some theosophical luminaries or perhaps by some personally significant aspect of the teachings.
- In order for the TS to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of humanity, it is essential that we endeavour to put the teachings into practice as far as possible.
- An unfaltering dedication within the organisation to the principle of Freedom of Thought is pivotal if we are not to narrow our focus to the point of becoming a sect. Can we not only tolerate, but fully accept, the points of view of others? Open minds hold personal points of view lightly as part of an ongoing exploration into life’s mysteries.
- Our doors need to remain open and welcoming to newcomers, perhaps even be opened a little more widely.
- We need to communicate our teachings in the most common modes of communication of our time and, as far as possible, in the language of our time. Hopefully, books will be around for many years to come. Lectures still have their place today, as do meaningful group discussions. Videotapes and audiotapes are useful. However, one of the most significant advances in communication in our times has been the Internet. It is one of the single most powerful influences on thought and communication today, particularly for young people. Its resources need to be judiciously utilised.

We are now approximately thirty thousand in number world-wide, a very small proportion of the world’s population. But the Society is not insignificant in the tide of world thought. If one considers our relative size during the past one hundred and twenty-five years, the influence of the Society in many areas of human endeavour has been disproportionate to its size. In fact, to trace the influence of the TS in various fields would necessitate the writing of a number of books.

One of the greatest challenges in belonging to a Society such as ours is that members are not spoon-fed answers. There is considerable effort involved in seeking Truth for ourselves. Some people find this too difficult and may search elsewhere which is, of course, their prerogative. For those who stay, the Ancient Wisdom teachings provide a tremendously rich springboard from which one can dive into the depths of Theosophy. The journey has endless possibilities.

The values on which the Wisdom Tradition are based are different from worldly values – they may be said to be qualitative rather than quantitative. If our Society does remain relatively small but its members possess a quality of sincere aspiration for Truth, the TS may be of more use to the inner founders of the Society than a large number of members who are more half-hearted about pursuing Truth and placing a theosophical attitude at the centre of their lives.

What of The Future?

Is it possible to crane our necks and contemplate the future of The Theosophical Society? Can we actually predict what our most useful role will be, say, in the coming century? Some may consider the TS to be at risk of becoming a ‘backwater’ in today’s spiritual supermarket. The writer does not possess a crystal ball which will tell the story of our future. However, some thoughts are shared here about what the TS may be, provided the above mentioned conditions can be met. The Theosophical Society has the marvellous potential to be a bastion of:

- *the altruistic work of the Great Ones* who originally inspired its formation
- *preservation of the rich Wisdom Tradition* which has come down to us throughout the ages in various guises
- *inspiration* for a world which is sorely in need of spiritual sustenance, perhaps more so than at the time of the Society’s founding
- *unity*, encouraging people to apply the principle of living Oneness in all actions, seen and unseen. Forming a nucleus of Universal Brotherhood remains a work in progress.
- *free enquiry* into the great Truths at the heart of life
- *universal values and thinking*, rather than nationalistic, parochial, materialistic or narrow religious attitudes which lead inevitably to divisiveness
- *promulgation* of the Wisdom teachings, using all opportunities to continue to make them known

Perhaps, ultimately, the actual physical form of this organisation is not crucial. Its membership will ebb and flow in various countries down the years. The TS may or may not own buildings. However, the theosophical tradition itself is continuous. If we remain true to this tradition, both as individuals and an organisation, then the Society has a bright future which will not be dulled or diminished. If the conditions mentioned previously are met, the TS will have a role of importance in world thought affecting many areas of human endeavour.

To return to HPB's words in *The Key to Theosophy*, one may ask whether the Society will mature from an 'evanescent comet' to a 'planet, ever revolving within the attraction of the sun of truth'. The quality of this universal body, The Theosophical Society, and the extent to which it will revolve around that sun, thus keeping the flame of Truth alive in the world, depends upon one thing — us!

References:

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