

**“That life be conducted with dignity”:  
Dag Hammarskjöld as statesman and man of spirit**

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“That life be conducted with dignity.” The words are Hammarskjöld’s, from an entry in his private journal, published after his death as *Markings*. Here in full is what he wrote, early 1959: “Conscious of the reality of evil and the tragedy of individual lives, and conscious, too, of the demand that life be conducted with dignity.” His words have something close to incantatory power, as if they are both prayer and policy. One already hears the man—his intense feeling for humanity, his recognition of light and dark in our lives, a kind of undefeated weariness, his sustained wish for the good, the primacy for him of sheer consciousness, of lucidity. He placed himself practically and spiritually in the live middle, where tragedy and the need for dignity are experienced not just as ideas but as forces. About that mid place, he improvised a metaphor in a letter to a friend at the beginning of 1958. “I live in a very obvious way right in the middle of the stream and I am forced to adjust my nerves so that they react as exactly and quickly as possible to the many evil and few good things that every day push us forward on the threatened road of mankind.”

Diplomatic leadership for Mr. Hammarskjöld was an act of understanding and patience, a wide opening of the mind to perceive both what would be for the best and what realistic limits on that “best” cannot be overcome just yet. He invariably looked to the future, to the next step. He was meticulously aware of detail in every diplomatic situation—Sir Brian Urquhart, his invaluable colleague and first major biographer, was amazed by his nearly overnight command of the intricacies of Suez Canal shipping. He saw and understood not just nearby detail but the entire terrain, and beyond that where resolution might be found through the kind of dialogue called negotiation. In May 1960, he offered a memorable, modest appreciation of dialogue: “I do believe...that...dialogue is badly needed, but dialogue requires quite a few things: objectivity, a willingness to listen, and considerable restraint. Those are all human qualities. No one of them is very remarkable, but they are all called for.”

Hammarskjöld knew where to look in literature for an echo of his values, for inspiration and for solace in hard times. This mattered to him. He belonged widely; no part of the world or of the world’s cultures, ancient and modern, was remote. He had such appreciation for what people are as he met them and for the long history of cultures. In a book by the scholar and translator of Chinese literature, Arthur Waley, he found a treasure concerning a band of peacemakers traveling through China centuries ago at a war-torn period in its history. “Constantly rebuffed but never discouraged,” he read in Waley’s eloquent translation, “they went round from state to state helping people to settle their differences, arguing against wanton attack and pleading for the suppression of arms, that the age in which they lived might be saved from its state of continual war. To this end they interviewed princes and lectured the common people, nowhere meeting with any great success, but obstinately persisting in their task, till kings and commoners alike grew weary of listening to them. Yet undeterred they continued to force themselves on people’s attention.” Hammarskjöld recognized himself

in this description. He appreciated its gentle wisdom: he too, of necessity, continued to force himself on the attention of kings and commoners. The results were often remarkable. He understood the necessity of facing circumstances, however difficult. He was unyielding on this point. "It should not be overlooked," he said in 1956, "that even with the best of men half-hearted and timid measures will lead nowhere. The dynamic forces of history will overtake us unless we are willing to think in categories on a level with the problem." Writing in the same year from the Middle East to his chief of staff, he showed what it means to be anything but timid: "Once you go head-first into it," he wrote, "even the most impossible task may show unexpected opportunities."

All of us in London today, and no doubt all participating by video link, are aware of the main events and crises faced by Hammarskjöld during his tenure as secretary-general, April 1953 through the catastrophe at Ndola, mid-September 1961. The first, unexpected rebuke—of the US government for meddling in the affairs of Guatemala; freeing the Secretariat from intrusive interrogations of US personnel; the successful mission to China that persuaded many member nations that, after all, they could "let Dag do it"—he had proved himself to be a consummately skilled diplomat of unshakable integrity and resourcefulness of mind; and then long, patient efforts through an innovation, shuttle diplomacy, to secure something like peace in the Middle East; the Suez Crisis that signaled the end of overt, violent colonialism; efforts in southeast Asia to forestall what would become the Vietnam War; the bizarre, short interlude at Bizerte, in Tunisia, which confronted Hammarskjöld and Charles de Gaulle in yet another last clutch at colonial power; and then the Congo Crisis, which took the lives of the two individuals, Patrice Lumumba and Mr. Hammarskjöld himself, who though vastly different could each see a possible light for a region that has remained ever after troubled.

There isn't time to explore these historic events; there is and must be time to continue for a further moment alongside the man. I never tire of encountering his resolute service in world affairs—call it a matter of hard geometry, of lines drawn, of ideologies, unashamed self-interest, suspicion and, nevertheless, the search for a peaceful community of nations. Hammarskjöld didn't mind. The peacebuilder advances toward conflict. "I feel that what very many people call negative sides," he once said, "—the talking, the conflicts, the flux of events, the uncertainties about outcomes and so on and so forth—are not negative sides but positive sides." That was one part of his life. The other part was internal, deeply internal, and of another kind: fluid not geometric, self-questioning, reliant on experiences of silence, stillness, and a poetry of prayer that allowed another human nature to declare itself in him. His efficacy in the world at large owed much to his contact with himself. He was, I'm quite sure, the first *mindful* public leader in the West.

What was the sound of his deliberate practice of mindfulness, how did it find its way into shared words? I have often quoted his recollection of an encounter in 1958 with a journalist working for a UN newsletter. Let's hear him again. "The other day," he wrote to a friend, "I was forced by a journalist to try to formulate my views on the main requirements of somebody who wishes to contribute to the development of peace and reason. I found no better formulation than this: 'He must push his awareness to the utmost limit without losing his inner quiet, he must be able to see with the eyes of the others from within their personality without losing his own.'" There was no prior model

for this approach, and at that time unlike today there was no public conversation about the virtues of mindfulness. His models were largely from time past—medieval Christian teachers and preachers, certain Chinese classics, and still other sources, some of our own time, that spoke intimately to him. He made them his own, they made him their own. I have never understood how the teachings particularly of Meister Eckhart and Thomas à Kempis (14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) came to inhabit him as living inspiration, touchstone, and guidance, but it was so. I have never understood how such high, austere teaching could invisibly enter the stream of modern political life through him, translated and rendered newly effective, but it was so.

This was evident nearly from the beginning. In his year-end 1953 radio address to the UN community, he spoke openly of the link between a faithfully explored identity, between self-knowledge and effective, just action in the world at large. “Our work for peace must begin,” he said, “within the private world of each one of us. To build for man a world without fear, we must be without fear. To build a world of justice, we must be just. And how can we fight for liberty if we are not free in our own minds? How can we ask others to sacrifice if we are not ready to do so? Some might consider this to be just another expression of noble principles, too far from the harsh realities of political life. . . . I disagree.”

We cannot encompass him, and there is no need to encompass him. His richness as an inspiration for the United Nations and as a spiritual seeker who found, and found again will remain with us wherever and whenever human beings long to conduct their lives with dignity and sensitivity. I wish to quote him once more, to honor the hope and recognize the brutality of these times in which we are living. “It is difficult,” he wrote to a friend as the Suez Crisis was settling, “to hear the low voice of reason or see the clear little light of decency, but, of course, both endure and both remain perfectly safe guides.” The low, nearly inaudible voice, the little light: with modesty, with certainty, he pointed the way.

Whatever lies ahead—we know it will be very difficult—there are words of Dag Hammarskjöld to which we can cling: he is our Meister Eckhart, our Thomas à Kempis, though he would be embarrassed were he to overhear me. I’m recalling an exchange of letters with David Ben-Gurion, 1957, when Hammarskjöld was doing his utmost to persuade the Israeli leader to withdraw troops that had been deployed during the Suez Crisis. “I fear that in our never-abandoned efforts to get nearer to the target we have in common—in your case peace for Israel, in my case perhaps just simply peace—we may have reached a dead point. . . . Such a situation requires some boldness. Indeed, it seems to me to be a situation where we must individually try to transcend our immediate duty in order to fulfill the higher duty of creative action. You know that my personal confidence in your ability in this respect has never flagged.” *The higher duty of creative action*: of this he was capable again and again; of this we must be capable. It is our turn.



Markings, 1956, 129:

Beyond obedience, its attention fixed on the goal—freedom from fear.

Beyond fear—openness.

And beyond that—love.

You can feel the threat against the future stronger and stronger, but paradoxically enough parallel to that is growing an irrational conviction that we shall be able to break through the causal chain of fear, clumsiness, self-assertion and plain common stupidity. (LETTER TO EYVID JOHNSON)

You dare your Yes—and experience a meaning.

You repeat your Yes—and all things acquire a meaning.

When everything has a meaning, how can you live anything but a Yes. (Markings, winter 1956)

The nerve signals from a wound are felt at once all through the body of mankind.

It is our duty to feel moral responsibility for a war in a remote part of the world as strongly as we would feel for a war in which we ourselves, or those dear to us, were directly threatened in a physical sense.

The process of learning to live together without war in this torn and distracted world of ours is going to continue to be painful and a constant challenge for the rest of our lives.

Gratitude and readiness. You got all for nothing. Do not hesitate, when it is asked, to give your all, which in fact is nothing, for all. (Markings, New Year's Eve 1956)