

MEET YOUR FRIEND

An Oration

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From an oration with which the author won first in the Minnesota Intercollegiate State Oratorical contest, 1935.

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I have a confession to make this evening. It is this: I have just recently met myself. No one introduced us. In fact, no one was near. We just met. Hitherto others had introduced themselves to me and their winsome ways had inveigled me away from "self." My true self was smothered--buried--dead. My old friends had done all the talking: I just listened--they had led; I merely followed--they piped, and I danced. I was the bond-servant of an inane gullibility--fettered by the opinions of others--captivated by the crowd--chained by fad and tradition. I was a conformist. Every word that was spoken or written earned my immediate subscription; everything I saw, I believed--everything I heard, I confirmed--everything I read, I conceded--a print-fed victim, a segment in a plastic mass mind, an individual dupe.

My new friend has reached down and taken hold of me, and lifted me up--up from the levels of a washed-out existence to the heights of dignified living. He has demanded that I stand on my own feet. He has taught me to believe in myself. He has shown me the power of discernment. He has revealed my capacities for discrimination, the art of thinking, and I have caught the vision of a thrilling, abundant life.

Do you level the charge of egotism at me? How can you? I beg to distinguish between egotism which is "self-praise," and "egoism" which is self-consciousness. To think lowly of one's self is not humility--it is, rather, humiliation.

The price paid for the luxuries and comforts of our modern complex civilization has been a pathetic submergence of individuality. We live in great cities. We are educated in crowds. We go to work in factory-armies. We are entertained--fifty-five million at a time. The result? A tragic result. Virtue--morality--thinking--leveled down with calm-like tightness to the mediocrity of the crowd standards.

...We live by the daily bread of slogans, epithets and phrases.... Says Rudyard Kipling, "Words are the most powerful drug used by mankind, not only do words infect, egotize, narcotize, and paralyze, but they enter into and color the minutest parts of the brain." Opium affects its victim by dulling and stupefying his mind; mere words, shouted in patriotic tones, render the minds of those who credulously swallow them equally impotent.

The written, as well as the spoken word yields the same paralyzing effect. A headline, blazing across the front page of a modern newspaper, immediately becomes a categorical truth in the minds of the majority. The gullible individual hands it on to his neighbor as a positive, indisputable fact. An illustration of this procedure can be found in any state or national election campaign....We refuse to use our minds when we could best afford to use them. There is nothing more striking in this nation today than the absence of intellectual independence in most individuals; they conform in opinion as they do in manners, and they are perfectly content with repeating formulas.

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