



On Being a Saint

There is nothing human about being an idea.

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“Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is possible that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never had much temptation to be human beings.”

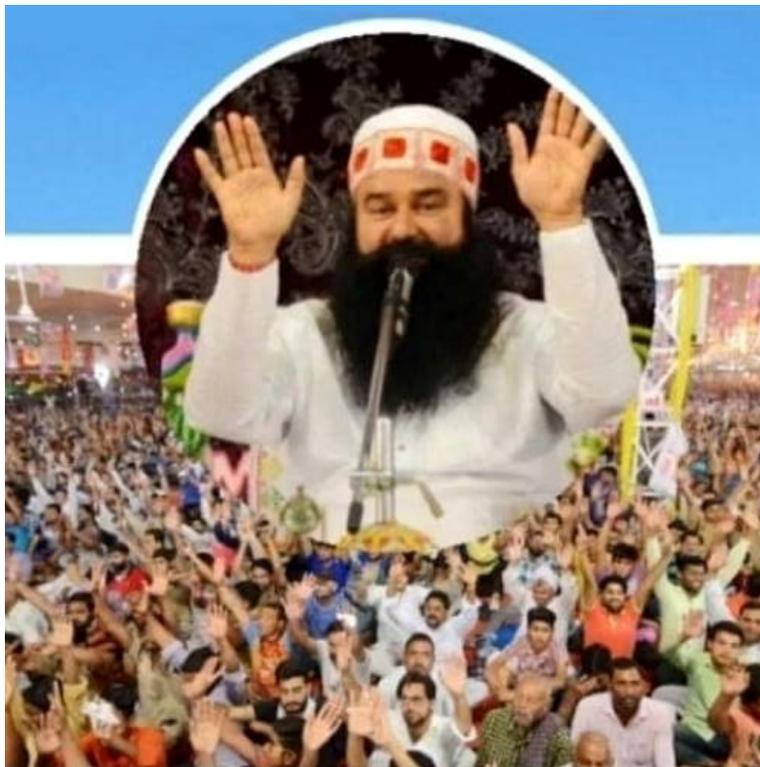
— **George Orwell**

Everyone wants to be appreciated. We thrive on recognition, appreciation, contribution, purpose, and achievement. The less we esteem ourselves, the more we yearn for the appreciation of others. The ultimate esteem, the ultimate achievement, is to be revered beyond reproach, to be considered a saint. And as unachievable as it may seem, most of us wouldn't mind a little of that, and quite a few of us devote our lives to achieving a piece of it. Especially as we get older and especially in this society.

I have found that most church people lean toward valuing moral virtue above all else. The more emotionally involved they are, the more they evangelize, and they do it for themselves, though they don't say that. I know a few psychotics who are obsessed with achieving a kind of sainthood.

Those who are aberrant are most interesting. We joke about the schizophrenic who claims to be Jesus, but I know people who affiliate themselves with saints and saviors. You would not identify them as deranged, but I think they're deranged. They'll brand themselves by name, image, or reference. For them, this connection is a lifesaver. It is both a model to follow, an image to portray, and protection from their own demons.

Consider yourself. How do you feel when you're credited with having done something great? If you're like most, it makes you feel good. The honor of heroism can be a life-changing event. I believe that most soldiers live for it, especially considering their agreement to commit immoral actions. Consider Memorial Day. Is it the day we honor our heroes, or is it the day we reaffirm our innocence?



Transference

We swim in a sea of transference. Transference is the image or identity that other people assign to us. We live in a culture whose degree of alienation can be measured by the level to which we're involved in the destruction of life around us. We exploit, we pay others to exploit, and we accept payment to exploit through our actions, attitudes, products, and proxies.

When we're personally responsible for our actions—and not responsible for the actions of others—we don't rely on others to assign values to us. If you sell a simple product—where simple means direct

from raw materials—then you judge your value on the role you play in the context you create. If you live a simple life, chopping wood and carrying water, then you measure your value on the plants you grow and the warmth of your home.

But the less personally responsible we are, the more we rely on the value assigned to us. Politicians, bureaucrats, power brokers, and industrialists are removed from personal responsibility. These people tend to measure value in proportion to power, control, or money.

These people, when they are sufficiently secure, buy virtue through philanthropy and no one is the wiser. When the Rockefellers build you a library, who will dig up the bones from beneath their empire? I got a Rockefeller grant; I didn't complain. If you're putting your hand out, then you'd better say thank you.

Transference plays a role in any relationship. The structural part of the relationship is the situation, it is inert and that is not transference. The emotionless part of the relationship is just a commodity. Unless we lack emotion entirely—and you probably would not know it if you did lack emotion—your relationship is built on transference. Reciprocal transference and counter-transference is called harmony.

“I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir,” said Alice, “because I am not myself, you see.”

— **Lewis Carroll**, from *Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*



A Good Relationship?

Being a saint is a poor basis for a good relationship, at least not a reciprocal one. For one thing, saints are expected to be saints always, and if you're human, alive, and involved, then doing everything right always cannot be assured. For this reason, most saints are either dead now, soon will be, or never existed in the first place.

Assigning to others your unconditional positive regard is unrealistic. It does nothing to help that person and only makes them dependent on you. According to Alfred Ellis, credited as being more important than Sigmund Freud in the development of modern psychology, unconditional positive regard is "stupid." What's important is unconditional self-regard, and that is quite a different matter.

"I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints."

— **Billy Joel**

We love to watch people get knocked down, and some of us love to knock other people down. If you can't be a saint—and some have no aspiration to virtue—then the next best thing is to rid the world of the unsaintly. You can either make this your philosophy—as in dismissing the whole dichotomy of good versus evil—or you can make it a profession, as in improving the market by defeating the competition.

Athletes maintain a strange identity. Part of being an athlete is physical: it feels good to be in shape and it feels great to be "in the zone." Another part is moral. Finding reward in being recognized as the best

at something. Why does a person feel good about being better than someone else, especially when it comes to doing something pointless? It always seemed crazy to me.

Winning a prize is either a need for affirmation or material reward. For kids, it's certainly the former. For professionals, it's mostly the latter, but not entirely. As long as there is some appreciation, there is some ego involved.

Something here is false. There is a kind of operant conditioning going on, a lack of real emotion. If winning is an empty form of appreciation, then what about heroism? We call our champions heroes, but are they? We also consider heroes to be champions, even though they didn't win anything.

If you want a real relationship, do not become a saint, champion, or hero. Do not become a celebrity, leader, or expert. All of these are appellations of power to which we give deference, and deference is not respect. Whenever a personal, romantic, or sexual relationship develops between people of unequal power the relationship is ungrounded and there can never be any sufficiency. The imbalance will amplify over time and the relationship will fail.



The Middle Ground

No one likes being profiled, but few complain when celebrated. I've been lionized and it feels sort of good, but also unreal. My first reaction is to wonder what's happening. If I was really heroic, I might expect recognition, but I'm just sleuthing away as always. The praise is more a reflection of my admirer's surprise, which is to say they didn't expect it. That's not entirely a complement!

"Thank you so very much. You are a human angel." — a former client

"You are directly responsible for my improvements." — a former client

I deflect credit from myself because any client needs to take responsibility for their own progress if they're going to sustain it. Even if I am responsible, that responsibility needs to be put on them as soon as possible.

I'm good at what I do. I'm good at avoiding credit. It would be better for business if I took more credit, much as Tony Robbins is given credit for empowering people which—by the way—is a good indication that he doesn't really. It's much better for my clients when they take credit for what happens to them. That's why I charge them a lot. I'll just take the money, thanks.

It's easy to accept gratitude. Appreciation sticks to ego like cat hair to a balloon. It can be quite touching, but no one needs laurels. To be celebrated is like stardom: it diminishes the soul.



The Downside

Let's use "hero" as a savior-label whether it be religious, military, political, or pop. People love heroes, but I'm not sure why. Comic book superheroes are not lovable. Perhaps it's not love but desperation: we need them.

We project onto heroes the virtues we wish we had. All the virtues we've been convinced we can never have because the world's not fair or we're not good enough. Convincing people to believe they're lacking is a cultural thing. If we can't be good enough, maybe we can be bad enough. Certain people do take that option, the dark road to power.

Now, we celebrate dark heroes as well as anti-heroes. It's not Batman whom we relate to in his latest incarnation, it's the beaten-down underdog; the powerful, bitter, false smile-wearing Joker. Who needs saints once you have the power to get what you want?

A comment on Quora argues an anti-hero is not a villain:

"An anti-hero has qualities that sometimes cross a line a traditional hero would not cross. They might have moral failings but the defining characteristic is that they DO have a moral code. Villains can be rich, interesting characters, and even sympathetic characters but that does not

erase the line between good and evil; at least not in works of fiction. The line between good and evil still exists.”

That’s not necessarily true. In the 2018 Marvel Comic movie *Avengers: Infinity War*, the super-villain Thanos succeeds in destroying half the universe in order to make it a better place. In the end, he retires to live a peaceful life. That’s the mutually assured destruction doctrine to which we pledge allegiance, which we’re paying for, and which we’re expected to uphold.

It starts in school. Kids shape their feelings in accord with the system and accept commendations for doing so. These are the kids trotted out for their high marks and good behavior. And with each reward a person is bought a little more, and less likely to criticize the hands that feed them or to reconsider.

We laugh at those cultures that believe a person’s soul is diminished by being photographed, yet we rejoice when our photos appear to stereotype us and we are diminished by it. It is not the camera that does it, it’s the viewers. We become what others tell us our image means.



The Upside

The therapeutic message is, “Don’t strive to be anyone but yourself.” Trot out all the characters who are who you want to be: the one with better brains, better looks, or greater recognition. Include those who you can’t be now but may someday become: the one that’s rich, powerful, virtuous, or celebrated.

These are all phantoms, ghosts born of your fears. They all must be dispersed. Send all of them to the light. What you need is what you make, not what's taken from others. The whole history of the West has been one of fear and theft.

Wherever you're offered protection from your deepest fears, or whoever offers this to you, know the bargain is a piece of your soul. Your task is to become all that you are, not something else. Recognize that these selves of your imagination have no soul,. They are social constructions enslaving you in service to the social organism in which they exist.

The social organism is an evolving being just like the individuals of the species. It is neither intrinsically good nor bad. Evolution itself is neither good nor bad. Each organism will tend toward its own advantage. The fantasies of identity that we're taught are the elementary particles of society. They're nothing but energy, and we are tempted to make ourselves of them.

Organisms do not evolve toward balance or harmony, instead, like weeds, each strives to take over. The balancing force is the ecology of which you're a part. You are the force that works to create a balances against Thanos and Mutually Assured Destruction. Were you aware that the nuclear arms race is heating up again? It is.

The positive force in human evolution is you. That's what personal growth is really about, that's what therapy should be about: to help you become a positive force in the whole context of life.

“Don't fool yourself, my dear. You're much worse than a bitch. You're a saint. Which shows why saints are dangerous and undesirable.”

— **Ayn Rand**, from *The Fountainhead*

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