

34
Next

Not long ago there lived in Eagle Bridge, New York, a white-haired, thin wisp of a woman fondly known the country over as Grandma Moses. She was born in the wilds of Washington County, New York, on September 7, 1860, and passed the century mark before she died. For most of her days she was a farm wife, busily helping with farm chores, raising five children (five others died in infancy) and performing the variety of cooking, baking, sewing, and house-cleaning tasks that befell a homemaker before modern conveniences eased her load.

When she was almost eighty years old and so afflicted with rheumatism that she could no longer do fancy work, Anna Mary Robertson Moses began to paint with oils as a hobby. When she had completed several pictures, admirers suggested that she place them on public display, so she had an exhibit in a drugstore, and another at a fair where she also displayed her fruit and jam. Grandma Moses won prizes at the fair for her canned goods, but none for her oil paintings.

However, Louis I. Caldor, a New York art collector, saw Grandma's drugstore exhibit, bought the paintings and asked for more. Exhibits in some of New York's most famous galleries and many more sales followed until Grandma Moses became nationally known.

One time after she had become widely known and her oil paintings had begun to command fancy prices, Grandma Moses was featured in a radio interview. The interviewer asked the little old woman how it felt to be famous, with her paintings reproduced on millions of Christmas cards, and she remarked, "Oh, I don't think about fame much. I keep my mind on what I'm going to paint next. I have got a lot of catching up to do!"

There is a touch of greatness in the simple wisdom of Grandma Moses. Although most people have a desire for distinction, the wise do not seek fame as an all-absorbing goal; their work - what they are going to do next - gets the attention that the foolish give to public acclaim. Acclaim and applause to the ambitious are like salt water to the thirsty; the more one gets the more one wants. To care a great deal for fame necessitates caring less for more important things, because our span of caring is always limited.

One chief problem with craving the approval of others and seeking fame is that it divides one's attention between the thing one is doing and how that thing is going to be appreciated. Divided attention is a basic cause of misery as can be understood by anyone who is trying to hear an address through the lusty squalls of the fussing youngster sitting two rows back; or by the person who is trying to concentrate on the concert pianist's rendition of a Chopin prelude while a bloodthirsty spring attempts to impale him through the upholstery of his concert-hall seat; or by the swain who at last has persuaded his sweetheart to take a boat ride where they can be alone, only to find they have been accompanied by a vast crowd of mosquitoes who sour the sweet-sounding love-talk with their villainous buzzing and their exasperating onslaughts on all exposed flesh.

For full enjoyment of anything - oil painting, lecture, music, or romance - we need moments of undistracted attention. Grandma Moses knew this. She did not attempt to keep one eye on her

painting and another on fame. When painting a picture, all her attention was on her work and between paintings: "I don't think about fame much. I keep my mind on what I am going to paint next!"

This consciousness of the high value of the immediate occasion is a common denominator of greatness. The best people do not put off good living until the conditions are ideal. They know that one prepares best for tomorrow by living fully today. Alexander Graham Bell did not invent the telephone by dreaming of some distant time when the world would be interconnected by a communications system of his making. He had an immediate problem, a next thing to do which, in being done well, led him on toward designing the instrument that made him famous. It wasn't fame he sought, nor wealth, nor the telephone - at least not at first. Mr. Bell had been a teacher in a school for the deaf and while there he married one of his pupils. Later he began a series of experiments with electrical apparatus hoping he could devise an instrument that would help his young wife to hear. It was in this effort that Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, accidentally in the course of these experiments. The next thing was to help his beloved wife, and secondary matters, fame and fortune, came running after.

Robert Louis Stevenson's life was so plagued with pain, weakness, general invalidism, and the forebodings of death that he had to do his best with the immediate present, if he was to be sure of doing anything at all. Moreover, his burdens were so great that he could hardly bear the thought of carrying them for long. The pricelessness of the present was vividly real for him. He once said: "Anyone can carry his burden, however hard, until nightfall. Anyone can do his work, however hard, for one day. Anyone can live sweetly, patiently, lovingly, purely till the sun goes down. And, this is all that life really means."

Well, it may not be all that life really means, but much of the meaning of existence lies in such wise handling of the immediate present.

Babe Ruth was one time asked what was the most thrilling moment of his career and he answered that it was during the third game of his last World Series. The Babe's game had not been going well. His team was behind, and it appeared the famous batsman would not be of much help to his teammates. Two strikes had been called on the Babe, and the disappointed crowd began to boo him unmercifully. The crowd's behavior both irritated and challenged him. Babe Ruth pointed to a distant spot and yelled at the jeering fans, "I'll knock it out there for you." And, he did. It was the longest home run that had ever been hit at Chicago's Wrigley Field. The inquiring reporter asked the Babe what he was thinking about when that ball was pitched.

"What did I think about?" the champ snorted, "Why, what I always think about! Just hittin' that ball."

Babe Ruth had the stuff of all champions: the capacity to concentrate on the present event.

While a painter like Grandma Moses, an inventor like Alexander Graham Bell, an invalid writer of adventure stories like Robert Louis Stevenson, or a baseball hero like Babe Ruth may illustrate, after a fashion, the value of attentiveness to the near-at-hand, the supreme example is Jesus Christ. Examine the gospels and see how, though seeking to save the world, he began by

redeeming those nearest him. Indeed it was this tendency to help the next person rather than to be part of a fanciful, starry-eyed political revolution that disappointed his followers. They wanted a spectacular demonstration of his power. He should assume command of the multitudes, overthrow the Romans, and set up an earthly kingdom. Instead he associated with simple peasants and fisher folk and showed them what they could be with his help. He dealt quietly with individuals - a woman of evil reputation who met him at a well at Sychar, another woman about to be stoned for her sins, a crooked tax gatherer, a rich young ruler, a leader of his people who timidly came to him at night, a dying thief on a cross next to his own. His life appears dramatic to us, but it was too commonplace to those who knew him best, too colorless, too close to them, too familiar. He couldn't be the expected Savior when he cared so little for spectacular things.

Had he been more dashing, or interested in glittering goals of conquest, power and fame, he would have satisfied his people better. He wanted a redeemed world, but he would not slight redemption of those near at hand by aiming at the redemption that was far off. So everyone near him, the smallest as well as the greatest, the worst as well as the best, who would respond to him felt his saving power.

Good occasions for service and spreading joy surround us all – now; is there any better way of witnessing to our faith and helping God and man than by doing our best with what is nearest at hand?