

Independence and Liberty (July 3, 1908)

From the earliest dawn of history the soul of man has aspired to independence and liberty. The desire was not born with the sires of '76, nor first expressed in the Declaration of Independence, since ages before the poets had sung of the sweet flower of liberty, and brave men had given their lives to secure independence from tyrant and king. Leonidas¹ dying at Thermopylae, Judas Maccabeus² marshaling the Jews against the encroachments of the Romans, Charles Martel³ hammering the invading Saracens from Europe, Joan of Arc⁴ battling for her native king, Huguenots⁵ and Puritans⁶ fleeing to America from the restrictions that surrounded them — all had visions of independence and liberty, as they saw them, that glorified to them the future and transfigured them before the eyes of men.

But, after all, it was only a partial vision that these men and women had. They were hampered, as we are, by environment; their aims were not full, their work was not perfect. The Grecian who was ready to repel a Persian tyrant would accept an Alexander;⁷ the Maid of Orleans, chafing for freedom from foreign domination, saw in her sweet virgin visions nothing better than the rulership of a French king in France; the Puritan who sought on the shores of New England "freedom to worship God" was ready to drive a Roger Williams⁸ or Anne Hutchinson⁹ from his community; and even the signers of the Declaration of Independence suppressed the paragraph which demanded liberty for the Negro.

Their very expressions, the very words they used, to voice the aspiration that burned within them, were circumscribed and inadequate. For countless centuries the world looked forward to liberty and independence as the acme of its hopes, and both were inadequate, because they failed to take into consideration the great social life which is at the base of all advancement.

The man who would be independent cannot be social. He must go to the wilderness and live and die unto himself, building his own house, tilling his own field, making his own clothing, providing his own amusements. If he should specialize his effort, and if he should look toward his fellow man, he ceases to be independent; for upon one he becomes dependent for his shoes, another for the cloth in his coat, another for the salt

that seasons his food, and upon an army of men and women for the articles that supply him with comfort and variety.

If he would have liberty he must not be restrained. The civil law restricting him in the use of land, the unwritten social law prescribing what is fit and decent, and the moral law suggesting that he restrain certain propensities he may have, are all limits to his liberty. It is only as he abrogates all of these, throws aside the claims of society and the suggestions of sentiment and humanity, doing only as his whim or notion may dictate, that he can have perfect liberty.

But of late years there has grown up a higher conception of things, a more clear seeing idealism, which demands neither the independence of the pioneer and ascetic, or the liberty of the anarchist or voluptuary. Instead of independence it speaks of interdependence; instead of liberty it seeks for freedom.

Interdependence is the order of organization, the law of society and commerce. It is not servile, but it serves. While independence limits one to his own talent and capacity, interdependence brings to his touch the talents and capacity of all men, the wide world over. Whether in iron machinery or in social life, interdependence assembles parts and uses them in beautiful harmony, to the accomplishment of grand results. Independence clothed the world in skins; interdependence has robed it in silks and fabrics of textures and tints that delight the eye. Independence ate meat burned on coals and bread made from cracked corn; interdependence searches the world for delicious and wholesome foods and serves them temptingly in every home. Independence lived in the cave, the hollow tree, the wigwam, or the tent; interdependence builds the modern cottage and the palace of glass.

Then, liberty has grown into a higher feeling for freedom. There is liberty in the wood, far from society; but there is freedom of motion in well regulated association. The perfect machine, moving in rhythm, is so jointed and attached, part to part, that there is no liberty for any; yet with what splendid freedom it moves, frictionless and logically, working out its marvelous design!

This is the highest destiny of man, the perfection of evolution from the solitary life of Eden to the higher society of the Kingdom of Heaven.

¹ Leonidas I (c. 540 BC-480 BC) was a king of Sparta who commanded the combined forces of Greece against the Persian invasion led by Xerxes I (519 BC-465 BC). In August 480 B.C., Leonidas led an army of 7,000 men against massively superior forces to defend a narrow pass at Thermopylae. After two days of fighting, during which more than 10,000 Persians were killed by the defenders, Leonidas sent the bulk of his forces to the safety of retreat, remaining to fight to heroic death in battle with a rump force of just over 2,000 men.

² Judas Maccabeus (d. 160 BC) was a Jewish priest who led an armed revolt against the Hellenic Seleucid Empire to defend recently banned religious practices, a struggle which lasted from 167 to 160 BC. Although he was killed in March 160 BC at the Battle of Elasa, the struggle was carried on by his brothers, who ultimately defeated the Seleucids and established an independent kingdom in Judea.

³ Charles Martel (c. 688-741) was a Frankish king who has been commonly attributed to have led a victorious campaign over Arab Muslim invaders, the so-called Saracens, in 732. Martel was the grandfather of Charlemagne (742-814), who became emperor of the Romans in 800.

⁴ Joan of Arc (c. 1412-1431) was a military leader for the uncrowned King Charles VII of France. She distinguished herself helping to breaking the English siege of Orléans in 1429, an incident in the Hundred Years War. She was captured in 1430 and after a trial for religious heresy was burned at the stake in May 1431.

⁵ The Huguenots were Protestant religious dissidents associated with the Reformed Church of France, a Calvinist sect. They were heavily persecuted by the Catholic French state, especially during the eighteenth century.

⁶ Puritans was a broad term applied to seventeenth century English Protestant religious dissidents who sought reform of the practice of the Church of England.

⁷ Alexander III of Macedon (356 BC-323 BC) gained the throne in 336 BC following the death of his father. He spent the next decade in an unrelenting military campaign of conquest, building a massive empire that stretched as far as India.

⁸ Roger Williams (c. 1603-1683) was a Puritan theologian in the Massachusetts Bay Colony who was tried for “dangerous opinions” in 1635 and ordered to be banished. After his expulsion he established the settlement of Providence in what became the new colony of Rhode Island, attracting an array of religious dissidents to the enterprise.

⁹ Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591-1643) was a Puritan lay religious leader that espoused free grace theology — an insistence that salvation depended upon belief in the divinity of a savior rather than upright behavior, personal development, and good works — an idea regarded as heretical by religious leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She was tried for the doctrine she advocated in 1637 and was sentenced to banishment, relocating to the new, less doctrinaire colony of Rhode Island.