

Forgetting the Self

by Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

How often have I prayed that God Almighty would teach me — and teach my fellow citizens — to forget ourselves when the moment grows serious, when matters become complicated, when problems multiply, and when our words and deeds are bound up with the public good.

Forgetting oneself in such moments is the surest path to sincerity in word and action, to freedom from personal motives and passions, and to preferring our country's welfare and hopes over our own interests and desires.

The truly brave man is he who can conquer himself before attempting to conquer others — who can master his impulses in joy and in anger, without excess or injustice, without causing others hardship or harm that he himself would resent.

Now that our country stands before great events and grave undertakings — a movement of reform that seeks to be complete, far-reaching, and vigilant in every matter — the Egyptian who is true to his country should forget himself, his appetites, his whims, and devote his heart and mind wholly to Egypt's service and to honest counsel in all that lies ahead.

I say this after reading a number of French newspapers and finding in them various reports and interviews attributed to Egyptians. Some among them seemed eager to clear themselves of every charge, others sought to explain the present events of our history and their near and distant causes, while others still described our aspirations, our ideals, and the ills from which we wish to free ourselves.

All this is good — when the intention is pure, when hearts are sincere, when souls rise above petty quarrels, and when minds are cleansed of the passions of love and hate, of spite and revenge.

Let me say at once that I read with satisfaction the interviews published with the Commander-in-Chief and with the Prime Minister. In them I found nothing objectionable, neither in their substance nor in their detail. They contained no accusation, no malice, no desire for revenge, no intrigue. They set out clearly the aims of the Revolution, the people's hopes in it, and the army and government's plans for fulfilling those hopes. The outside world has a right to understand what we are doing — to see that our Revolution wishes harm to no one and seeks only that none should wish harm to it.

Yet I also came across other statements which, I must confess, I wish their authors had handled more cautiously before speaking to the foreign journalists who sought them out. For, without intending to, they wronged their country in ways that served no purpose but harm.

Egyptians know well that what takes place in their land arouses the curiosity of foreigners and drives foreign newspapers to satisfy that curiosity by publishing whatever comes to hand. These papers do not pause to reflect or weigh their words; they care only to feed their readers' hunger for news. And the more sensational a statement, the keener their appetite for it. It is therefore a duty upon Egyptians — for their own sake and for their country's — to be prudent, to be guarded, to remember Egypt, and to forget themselves.

I do not deny that the era before the Revolution was rife with error and corruption. But those faults concern Egyptians alone. They are not the concern of foreigners. If any Egyptian knows of a wrong

done to individuals or to the nation, his path is clear: he must report it to the proper Egyptian authorities, who will judge and punish as justice requires. Foreigners, however, have no right to meddle in these matters — not in the least.

And if an Egyptian feels that suspicion or accusation surrounds him and wishes to clear his name, let him do so before his fellow Egyptians — those whose good opinion benefits him and whose disapproval pains him. The foreigner gains nothing from knowing whether he is innocent or guilty; he merely repeats what he hears to gratify his readers' curiosity, caring little if it harms the man himself or his country.

The least an Egyptian owes himself and his nation is never to speak of Egypt abroad except with respect, never to tarnish her reputation, and to remember that foreigners do not judge us with love or fairness. They often imagine in us faults that are not ours and attribute to us defects we do not possess. We must not add to their unjust suspicions our own indiscretions, nor reinforce their ill opinion of us with our own heedlessness.

Foreigners know well that Egypt did not rise out of mere love of revolution or taste for upheaval. She rose to lift oppression, to establish justice, to abolish corruption, and to spread reform. They have seen enough of the wrongs we endured and the decay that afflicted us. They have their embassies in our land, observing what we do and say; they have their correspondents, watching our affairs and reporting what they wish. The least we can do, when dealing with such journalists, is to correct their errors — not to multiply them.

What good can come of Egyptians accusing one another in the foreign press of corruption, bribery, or treachery? Such talk brings only disgrace upon Egypt as a whole and upon all her sons alike — those who boast of themselves as heroes and those whom they denounce as villains.

I assure my readers that I do not speak here to defend one Egyptian against another, nor to support any party or faction. I have made it my habit, whenever I leave Egypt, to leave behind all her quarrels and divisions — to remember only that I am Egyptian, nothing more. When I return home, I may agree or disagree, befriend or oppose — but I reserve those rights for within my country, not beyond it.

These days we live are not days for rivalry or conflict, but for cooperation — for serving the nation, securing its dignity, achieving the justice it seeks, and reaching the honour it deserves. How then can we justify not only quarrelling among ourselves at home but carrying those quarrels abroad, into the world that watches us — the very world whose goodwill we need, whose respect we must earn, and whose confidence we hope to restore?

Would that every Egyptian set himself as his own watchman when he meets foreign journalists, speaking with prudence of our political, social, and economic affairs. Would that public opinion in Egypt could see for itself what some of our own people are saying to the foreign press — to know who deceives them and who truly serves them; who smiles with a bright face while hiding a dark heart.

And finally, may God teach us the grace of forgetting ourselves. For in forgetting oneself in times of duty and public service lies all the goodness there is. None truly serves his country — nor sincerely seeks its welfare — who remembers himself whenever he speaks or acts.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

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