

Educating “Statesmen in Full”: Lessons from Thomas More, Patron of Statesmen

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ABSTRACT: This address presents Thomas More’s understanding and practice of statesmanship, indicating how he taught his children and others the serenity and good-humor he saw as essential elements of charitable and effective “leading citizenship.”

THANK YOU FOR THE INVITATION to join you in honoring Dr. Frank Zapatka, that great pro-life leader whom I had the privilege to know and work with in the late 1970s as he and I worked with Nellie Grey, another of the early outstanding pro-life leaders of our country. In Frank’s honor, let me share reflections on what Thomas More learned from his decades of study about the qualities needed in a nation’s leaders – and the essential role played by his early teachers.

By the end of his life, More had every reason to be dispirited and pessimistic. He had been betrayed by the judges, lawyers, and professionals closest to him. Only one bishop in all of England joined him in resisting a tyrannical king. The rule of laws enshrined for centuries was ignored. Parliament was manipulated. The universal Church he loved was outlawed in England, and would be for the next three hundred years. He lost everything he possessed. His health was broken, and not even the children he personally

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educated agreed with his “scruple of conscience.”

Yet More was serene and good-humored to the end. His scaffold jokes are among the most famous events of his life. At the bottom of the rickety stairs to the scaffold, he said to his jailor (paraphrasing): If you help me up, I’ll get myself down. And when his head was resting upon the chopping block, he moved out his beard, saying to the executioner: the beard wasn’t convicted of treason. But there were many examples of his unfailing good humor. This riddle, for example, that he told his daughter and his friends when they visited him in prison: “that a man could lose his head and have no harm.”

What explains this manner of England’s most famous “leading citizen”? It was not simply More’s temperament. His chosen way of life was deeply theological, rooted in the cultivated virtues of a faith lived in the present moment, a hope that did not depend on appearances, and a charity rooted in eternity. Not only did More believe in God’s providence, but he also lived in the confidence that it works through everything. *Omnia in bonum*: all things work to the good for those who love God, as More recalled from Romans 8:28. But also, from his youth, he reflected deeply the biblical counsel that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). These convictions helped More keep everything in perspective. When his children suffered disappointment, he explained in a homey but vivid and memorable way that “we can’t get to heaven on a featherbed.” He in fact taught his children to cultivate and work for good cheer. Consider this letter that More sent his children:

At Court, 3 September 1522

Thomas More to his dearest children and to Margaret Gyge, whom he numbers among his children, greeting.

The Bristol merchant brought me your letters the day after he left you, with which I was extremely delighted. Nothing can come from your workshop, however rude and unfinished, that will not give me more pleasure than the most meticulous writing of anyone else. So much does my affection for you commend whatever you write to me. Indeed, without any recommendation, your letters are capable of pleasing by their own merits, the charm and pure Latinity of their style. There has not been one of your letters that did not please me extremely. But to confess ingenuously what I feel, the letter from my son John pleased me the best, both because it was longer than the others and because he seems to have given it a bit more labor and study. For he not only put out his matter prettily and composed in fairly polished language, *but he plays with me both pleasantly and cleverly, and turns my jokes on myself wittily enough*. And this he does not only merrily, but with due moderation, showing that he does not forget that he is joking with his father, whom he is eager to delight and yet is cautious not to give offense.

Now I expect from each of you a letter almost every day. I will not admit excuses (for John makes none) such as want of time, sudden departure of the letter carrier, or want of something to write about. No one hinders you from writing, but, on the contrary, all are urging you to it. And that you may not keep the letter carrier waiting, why not anticipate his coming, and have your letter written and sealed, ready two days before a carrier is available? How can a subject be wanting when you write to me, who am glad to hear of your studies or of your games, and whom you will please most if, when there is nothing to write about, you write just that at great length. Nothing can be easier for you, especially for girls, loquacious by nature and always doing it.

One thing, however, I admonish you, whether you write serious matters or the merest trifles, it is my wish that you write everything diligently and thoughtfully. It will do no harm if you first write the whole in English, for then you will have much less trouble and labor in turning it into Latin; not having to look for the matter, your mind will be intent only on the language. That, however, I leave to your own choice, whereas I strictly enjoin you that whatever you have composed you carefully examine before writing it out clean; and in this examination first scrutinize the whole sentence and then every part of it. Thus, if any solecisms have escaped you, you will easily detect them. Correct these, write out the whole letter again, and even then do not grudge to examine it once more, for sometimes, in rewriting, faults slip in again that one had expunged. By this diligence you will soon make your little trifles seem serious matters; for while there is nothing so neat and witty that will not be made insipid by silly and careless loquacity, so also *there is nothing in itself so insipid that you cannot season it with grace and wit if you give a little thought to it.*

Farewell, my dearest children. [emphasis added]

Here you can see how More quite deliberately cultivated in his children good humor and care in dealing with others.

Later in life, when three leading bishops of England – and close friends of More – tried to convince him to join them in attending King Henry’s wedding to Anne Boleyn, More told them in a light-hearted but earthy and extraordinarily pointed way that he would not prostitute himself for any reason or any price. Notice especially the last sentence:

My lords, [your request] put me in remembrance of an emperor that had ordained a law that whosoever committed a certain offense (which I now remember not) except it were a virgin, should suffer the pains of death, such a reverence had he for virginity.¹ Now so it happened that the first committer of that offense was indeed a virgin, whereof the Emperor hearing was in no small perplexity, as he that by some example fain would have had that law to have been put in execution. Whereupon when his Council had sat

¹ See Tacitus’s *Annals* 6.5.9 on Tiberius and the rape and murder of Sejanus’s young daughter.

long, solemnly debating this case, suddenly arose there up one of his Council, a good plain man, among them, and said, "Why make you so much ado, my lords, about so small a matter? Let her first be deflowered, and then after may she be devoured." And so though your lordships have in the matter of the matrimony hitherto kept yourselves pure virgins, yet take good heed, my lords, that you keep your virginity still. For some there be that by procuring your lordships first at the coronation to be present, and next to preach for the setting forth of it, and finally to write books to all the world in defense thereof, are desirous to deflower you; and when they have deflowered you, then will they not fail soon after to devour you. "Now my lords," quoth he, "it lieth not in my power but that they may devour me; but God being my good lord, I will provide that they shall never deflower me."²

Although good-humored, this response was as powerful as any that has ever been given to those responsible for public affairs.

To understand merry Thomas More, one has to consider the battle for perspective and good cheer that he fought during his whole life. First and foremost, his fight was an internal one: against moods, passions, whims, and vain fantasies of imagination. Although this fight was primarily internal, the external results were abundant: his bright and cheerful home, his life of integrity, his valued and much sought-after judgment, his life as a civic leader who made himself accessible to the people he served. As the evidence shows, his mood was not determined by the success or failure of his personal or professional ventures. For example, in twelve years of public office – during a period of revolutionary change – his own family knew him to be angry only twice, and both times were responses to public attacks aimed at destroying himself and those he loved.

Yet More's fight also became a political one, waged at the highest level, a level on which matters were judged by the tribunal of conscience. More knew, however, that unless he fought well in the first battle, political matters would never reach that higher tribunal. For if reason did not reign over the passions in himself, how could it reign in matters involving others? If conscience did reign, however, More knew of no stronger human aid to seek truth and serve justice.

In an essential way, More's unusual calm and good humor came from his habits of mind and character – learned from excellent, committed teachers – enabling him to attend to conscience, to assess the particular demands of each situation while keeping his eyes focused upon eternity. More's best teachers

² From William Roper's *Life of Sir Thomas More*.

helped him to learn early not to rely on his own judgment or his own human strength as the ultimate foundation of his prudence and courage.

In one of his last letters to Meg, Sir Thomas responded to his daughter's concern over her lack of courage. Sympathizing with her, he confessed his own lack of courage when confronted with the trials of life: "Surely, Meg, a fainter heart than thy frail father has can you not have." Sir Thomas then gave one of his most fundamental counsels, a counsel he had given many times over many years in many different ways, going back to his earliest poetry. In these words can be discovered the ultimate foundation of that courageous statesmanship which so many have admired in the life of Sir Thomas More:

That you fear your own frailty, Marget, does not displease me. May God give us both the grace to despair of our own self, and wholly to depend and hang upon the hope and strength of God. The blessed Saint Paul found such a lack of strength in himself that in his own temptation he was twice obliged to call and cry out unto God to take that temptation from him. And yet he did not attain his prayer in the manner that he requested. For God in his high wisdom, seeing that it was (as he himself said) necessary for him to keep him from pride...answered, "My grace is sufficient for you." ...And our Lord said further, "'Virtue is perfected in weakness.'" The more weak that man is, the more is the strength of God in his safeguard declared. And so Saint Paul said, "All is possible in Him who strengthens me."

This is the man of worldly wisdom and fatherly tenderness who was made "Patron of Statesmen" in 2000, at the request of tens of thousands of leaders from 95 countries. In the official Latin, he is the patron of *gubernatorum* meaning "pilot or steersman" – someone skilled in governing the ship of state through the stormy seas of life. Our English word "governor" comes from that term.

But the term that Thomas More used was a word chosen from Cicero, a fellow lawyer, philosopher, rhetorical genius, and captain of state: *princeps*. As Cicero uses the term, a *princeps* is a citizen who literally "captures first place" (from *primus and capio*) by merit, by proven service. The concept is also found in Xenophon, Plato, Thucydides, Aristotle, Plutarch, and our own common experience. These "leading citizens" are not only among the most gifted in a country but have also exerted extraordinary labor in acquiring and refining foresight, speech, law, and a full command of the country's highest culture in literature, history, and thought – because all these are needed to be an effective "leading citizen."

More educated and trained himself quite deliberately, up to the age of

forty, and he repeatedly tested himself before agreeing to enter as a “leading citizen” the service of a king he knew to have tyrannical leanings. Until More was 54, he and others helped keep Henry’s tyrannical desires in check and for two additional years, More retained Henry’s friendship.

But how did More actually prepare himself to pilot those later storms of life? He was born in a middle-class family in London, a city that had been struggling to govern itself for hundreds of years, with unusual cooperation between church and city. From his many good teachers, More learned the important roles of nature and grace and how grace can and must build upon nature.

With the help of his early teachers, More reflected deeply on nature’s power and needs, on how difficult it is to form a conscience in truth, rather than “framing that conscience” by the counsel of our own desire or by the expectations of popular opinion. In one of his early works, More speculated that not four out of four thousand think through the powerful role that pleasure plays in their life-decisions or how much particular pleasures actually motivate their actions; he pointed out powerfully that most of us follow the “counsel of desire” rather than the counsel of truth. More “showed” this artfully in his early collection of 280 poems written and published with *Utopia*, showing both the humor and terror of human folly unchecked. More also showed the practical consequences of this by publishing his first book in English about the “weapons of spiritual combat” and the need to use them “day and night.”

Understanding “feelingly” the difficulty of this challenge was a major spur to More’s own remarkable practice of life-long learning, of deep study, of constant training, right up to the last moments of his life.

That commitment to deep study, learned from his teachers, was a striking feature of More’s entire adult life. At age twenty-three, Thomas More gave a lecture series on Augustine’s thousand-page *City of God*, at the invitation of his most learned teacher, William Grocyn. That same year, right after he completed his legal studies, More took up the study of Greek and helped convince Erasmus to do the same. Both mastered the language in three years and More challenged Erasmus to a Greek-translating contest of the comic writer Lucian. And why choose Lucian? Because through his comic irony, More pointed out, no one could probe more deeply or more effectively without losing “equanimity.” This was an important insight about human nature that More came to see early in life, a truth that guided his entire life and that sets him apart as one of the great Renaissance writers who would have a profound effect

on thinkers like Shakespeare.

To think well and clearly oneself while helping others think well and clearly requires a calm soul. You want the captain of your ship calmly calculating during a storm, not cowering in fear or rashly shouting random orders. But I'll return to this point.

After mastering Greek, More spent the next fourteen years of his married life setting aside early morning hours to study the greatest classical and Christian writers to help him form his own conscience and to refine his own intellectual and professional and contemplative skills.

More wrote his own history of England in these years, comparing its structure and strengths and problems with those presented by the Greek Thucydides and Herodotus and the Roman Sallust, Tacitus, and Livy. He never published or circulated that history during his lifetime. He studied carefully the thought of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas – as it related to his own life and times.

More's commitment to character development, also learned from his best teacher, was another striking characteristic of More's entire life. He took on, from his late teens and twenties, a demanding program to "forge and fashion" his own character and soul. Facing his own personal struggles in youth, More tells us, brought him "almost to the gates of hell," and in searching for his own particular vocation, More came to see his path as, with typical Morean realism, being "a chaste husband rather than a licentious priest." It was during this period that More wrote a series of rhyme royal poems on the spiritual combat and began to train himself not only to endure pain but gladly to take on duties and tasks requiring pain.

Here it may be worth drawing attention to one principle of nature clear in earlier times but virtually forgotten in our own times, but emphasized by More throughout his life. Cicero, in his book *On Duties*, put it this way: leaders have a duty "above all" to see that the young "be protected against sensuality and trained to toil and endurance of both mind and body" (*De Officiis* 1.122). How More did this in his own family would be another important lecture in itself.

In More's life, it is striking to see just how hard he worked, and how cheerfully. Although a genius, he was known to be the first at the court in the morning, and his custom was to take care of things at home and at work whenever the need arose. In his writings, the words *industry* and *labor* occur frequently – from his earliest writings to the very last sentence he wrote in the Tower during the last days or hours his life; it summarizes a guiding principle

of his entire adult life: “The things, good Lord, that I pray for, give me thy grace to labor for.” In his early writings, More showed clearly the dangers of negligence and sloth that lead to omitting more than half the good God wants us to do. Related to this, More also warned against those “fond fantasies” that tempt even the best of people from facing and taking on the difficulties of one’s place in life: from the student’s care in their studies to the statesman’s toil in the ever-challenging arena of public life.

More was clear-sighted about the need to respect nature, to provide the time and conditions necessary for full development – regarding himself, his family, his country, his tradition.

In all these realms, More learned that first and foremost we human beings should be led by persuasion, not force. This truth led More to spend twenty years, as Erasmus tells us in amazement, in refining his rhetorical abilities: a rhetoric of irony and humor.

In light of these truths, practical genius that he was, More recognized the need to test himself, using this honest assessment as the incentive to constantly and progressively “forge and fashion” a character guided by a conscience rooted in truth and ordered to justice; this More knew requires industriousness, struggle, that spiritual battle “day and night” – but in joy, knowing God loves a cheerful giver; knowing that God is a friend ever present day and night.

Because all human beings are fallen, and because all are free to neglect their first love and to indulge their God-like qualities for their own sake – not for God and others – there is always a need for good laws and institutions to guide and check those in both Church and state.

More was well aware of the weaknesses of the institutional Church and of an English monarch and nobility in love with conquest and war.

More’s most daring innovations were discretely hidden in his provocative literature, literature so powerful and perceptive that Shakespeare would use it not only as a direct model for his four earliest plays, but also indirectly throughout his career. These innovations all relate to More’s project of bringing the renaissance to England, that is, of introducing those concepts and terms and arts that would define the emerging modern world: the dignity of all, liberty under law, and self-governing citizens led by an elected “leading citizen” who is a master of law wisely able to respect the proper spheres of church and state, despite the human flaws and limitations of both. More saw clearly that law was powerless without properly educated leaders proven by long trials of fire “to be wise as serpents, innocent as doves” – one of More’s favorite short

descriptions of the prudent citizen. He knew from his long study of history that only such individuals, forged by “great study and loyal industry,” could devise and execute laws, building on the best reflections of the past.

More also saw that law and liberty were powerless without the institutional innovations that only “leading citizens” could successfully devise because only they would be trusted enough to convince enough people to try them, and because only they would know the particulars of the country’s history to know what innovations to propose.

Throughout his life, More showed how to build from within, you might say, what his society and his world would need to achieve – in generations to come, through “great study and loyal industry”³ – more justice and lasting peace.

Only the “leading citizen” has the knowledge, skill, virtues, and grace to pilot the seas of life with the necessary equanimity during storms and emergencies that will always arise. These leading citizens are needed in every profession. But More shows that these leading citizens are not simply born. They require excellent teachers, strong motivators, and exceptional virtue and hard work.

Let’s work and pray for those needed in our own time.

³ This is the phrase used to describe More the “statist” (statesman) in the play *Sir Thomas More*, written collaboratively by five London playwrights including Shakespeare – which was never approved for performance by Queen Elizabeth’s censor.