

# An essay on giants of mankind

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## SUMMARY

*Great people are relentless in creation on the planet, exalted magicians of words, thoughts and deeds. An extraordinary man of excellence can bring immeasurable good to his race, faith, country or civilization. We should not forget that the man is a building block of creation and that sometimes he is not aware of how much of his creative zeal and fruitful energy is hidden in his spiritual flight and profound thoughts. Fortunately, the giants of the world (Aristotle, Hegel, Heidegger, Dostoevsky and Shakespeare) had timely recognized their gift and dedicated their valuable life to fertilize it. Nothing that God has given to the Man is without a reason. Nothing is given with the bad intention that gifts of spirit should die, unfertilized, overlaid and empty, when the person physically leaves this world. That exceptional value of the One is meant to be passed as the most precious gift on to new generations open to fruitful new knowledge. The Serbian race throughout its eventful and turbulent history and painful existence has delivered rich gifts of beauty, spirit, wisdom and struggle for freedom to the world heritage. Studenica is the place where St. Simeon Mirotočivi (the one who spreads peace) laid foundations of our state, and Saint Sava, the first light and dawn among the Serbs, christened our race for ever.*

**KEY WORDS:** Famous Persons; History

A man is a big secret, the most ambiguous riddle in the world of created beings; all contradictions and entanglements of the other world are woven in a human being, tiny as he is in his body and steps. Among all animate beings, only the man seems to be a persistent traveller of the terrestrial paths, an exalted flier of celestial patterns, a cosmic dreamer of eternity<sup>1</sup> and a frightened child of Destiny. How can a Man take antinomies of soul standing on his feet, what can he do with the depths of over-ripe thoughts, soaring of courageous imagination, fears of hope, betrayal of meaningless morning, fallen stars of liberty, how can he bear the death of the parents, horrible dreams of transience of all things, huge waves of human evil, accumulated darkness and nights of the world, a few valuable grains of Love and lights of Good? How much power that cannot be relinquished, everlasting strength and questioning thoughts does the Man need so that he may see the infinity of the Skies, understand quiet stability of the Earth, bear simmering desperation of the Body, survive never-ending struggle of multilayered and wounded Soul, and get to love flights of the Spirit? The Man is transient, although he looks forward to eternity; limited by time and bound to his body, he is eager to break free and conquer the summits of the world – a being governed by basic instincts and magnificent Spirit of freedom alike; prone to commit crimes against his brothers although capable of reaching shining domes of a saint, he can be a coward, villain, wretched and despised creature, rejected by his kin, condemned by his only child and abandoned by his own mother, but nevertheless he is the one to extend to the limits of a gigantic hero, to become a knight of light and hope, a beacon of centuries, and a truthful face of human race<sup>2</sup>.

Everything that can be imagined in our world can be transformed into the secret of the Man, on which the Heaven may be built and the Hell paved, any crime committed and a genuine feat of faith fostered. The man is often a traitor of humankind, and the one who is the witness of the divine nature of humans; he is inclined to perpetrate a vicious crime which makes a noble soul freeze, but also to reach the magnificent flight of cosmic light to freedom, leave an indelible trace to be remembered in the centuries of faith and days of hope<sup>3</sup>. The man, as a corporal and spiritual being full of secrets, carries Faith, Love, and Meaning on his feeble shoulders. The centuries that have gone by keep talking through thoughts written by humans, and, while taking rest in restless human heads, they treasure all future hopes and flights of the World. Being interposed between the animal and the Lord, body and spirit, heaven and earth, in a permanent struggle with himself, other people, and eternal destiny, the man is always stretched, but ennobled by Hope and invigorated by Faith<sup>4</sup>. It must be terrible for any human to be crucified between a saint and a tormentor, eternity and oblivion, faith and nothingness, commander of centuries and nameless slave.

Who, among all people, is so great to be eternal, a human colossus of centuries? Do we mortal, transient people, know about those who are to become immortal, everlasting, or everything is doomed to be enshrouded in the veil of oblivion, as the sand tower is washed away by raindrops. The Lord loves those who are great, time respects them, and generations across the world remember them. It is hard to say which obstacle is more demanding with respect to human eternity – is it the perfect Creator who receives an individual man in his palace, or perhaps cruel Time, a distant,

Arch Oncol 2010;18(4):149-52.

UDC: 2-18:2-265

DOI: 10.2298/AOO1004149K

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Received: 11.10.2010

Accepted: 14.10.2010

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Vojvodina, Sremska Kamenica

<sup>1</sup> "Your belief in immortality can be taken from no one...To believe in immortality, you should recognize your life in its immortal part...Replacing worldly, temporary things with the eternal ones – that is the way of life, the road leading to its good." Leo Tolstoy, *Way to Life* (translation from Лав Толстой, *Путь у жизни, II, Златна књига*, Лесковац, 2009, p. 214-215 and 218)

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Tutu, who has been awarded the Nobel prize for his prominent role in the struggle against the apartheid, demonstrated genuine courage when, after the massacre in Sharpeville, he stood by the killed people urging the survivors not to hate the killers but to choose non-violence as the way to freedom.

<sup>3</sup> Asked about the hardships that Nelson Mandela had gone through, Tutu explained that "it was a magnificent metamorphosis through which Mandela went through, so that he has become magnificent, not bitter, but willing to forgive."

<sup>4</sup> Mother Theresa will be remembered for her prayer "In spite": "The good you do will be forgotten as soon as tomorrow. In spite of that, do good...Your help is really needed, although people may attack you as soon as you help them. Help them, in spite of that...Give all you can to the world, and they will knock your teeth out. In spite of that give all the best to that world..."

impartial judge of ephemeral things that measures the merits of all and, disinterested, does not take gifts from the weak, let alone people as a measure of eternity – just waste of words.

Is this earthly life of a genius characterized by happiness, comfort, luxury, ease and joy of life, or rather by terrible pains and abnegation of close people and necessities? Could it be intertwined and surrounded with calamities of the world? It is difficult to say what the physical lives of all giants may have been like. There have been many legends about them and various human deeds, but few giants really enjoyed their earthly existence. Nothing of historical greatness or decisive significance can be free from difficulty, peril, hardship, self-denial and patience.<sup>5</sup> There is an unwritten law that great people are persecuted<sup>6</sup>, misunderstood, humiliated, imprisoned, mistreated by their contemporaries and their time; authorities of all kinds have dealt with them treacherously, and not only once have they perished on the path of light, freedom and hope<sup>7</sup>. The world's leaders of non-violence Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King were assassinated and the great count of words Leo Tolstoy died alone at the countryside railway station escaping from the world. Why were the contemporary times, rulers and mobs annoyed with the beacons of new eras? Great people have always been demanding more justice for the deprived and humiliated in this world, they have been protecting the weak and persecuted. They have come with prophetic Ideas<sup>8</sup>, preaching Love<sup>9</sup>, and, pure in heart, they have cherished Freedom and laid down their life for the goddess of Justice. The giants are characterized by modest requests with respect to their life, volcanic life-generating power and inexhaustible energy of spiritual light.

Great people have always been pushing forward steadily, without looking back or paying attention to hardships of personal life<sup>10</sup> or tragedies inflicted upon them by those who hate freedom. They have sacrificed their precious memories for the sake of the world's ideals and put up with humiliations and misfortunes of their kin because they know, because they cherish a deep faith that they are struggling for the most sacred and eternal values of the man, which the Heaven, Meaning and Time surely appreciate. Where ordinary people obediently stop, the giant of the world, like a gush of water, keep going unshakably to their goals; where others feel tired and lose their faith they walk bravely to unknown; where ordinary people are worried about trivia of life, they sacrifice themselves and chant the hymns of life<sup>11</sup>. Martyrs of mankind and those who suffer lay their life at the altar of their time in the name of the ideals of true justice, winged freedom, precious knowledge<sup>12</sup>, noble humanity, pure faith and powerful truth<sup>13</sup>. The dungeons of human giants are the halls of light, for they illuminate the torturer, bringing the lost and hopeless to the paths of faith. Around them, all that humanity has forfeited rises again spiritually, growing bigger than itself and its disgraced time<sup>14</sup>. Do not look for trivial comfort of happiness among the giants of mankind, nor for short-term calculated actions or routine tedious lives, because the Lord has sent them to this world to be the people of the Mission and epoch-making deeds, who stretch the boundaries of freedom and bravely push forward to meet new people. They are Prometheus of new days. The giants of the world live their physical life with us, fortunately for us and unfortunately for them, because they must feel confined among other people, restrained by short steps and customs of the community. They can only spread their wings in the bright fields of novelty, clearness, non-repetition and sublimation. The legends of epochs speak with our own words, but few can hear them; the centuries, universe and lasting memories

<sup>5</sup> St Thomas Aquinas was canonized in 1323, following dismissal of all accusations against him. In 1567, he was declared the teacher of the Roman-Catholic church, and finally in 1879, which means 605 years after his physical death, his theology was stated to be a definite exposition of the Catholic doctrine. Genuine value cannot die.

<sup>6</sup> The verdict was: "May he be damned during the day, and may he be damned at night! May he be damned when he goes to bed, and damned when he gets up! May he be damned when he is leaving and may he be damned when he is coming!... May revenge and rage of the God keep burning against this man who has brought to himself all damnations recorded in the Book of Law...let no one say a word to him, verbally or in writing, let no one show him mercy...no one read the papers written by his hand!" When the verdict was delivered philosopher Baruch Spinoza was only 24 years old and had no means for living. The price to pay for freedom of thought and courage to act has always been high. It is difficult to reconcile order and freedom; this can be achieved only by wise rulers, great nations, and sublime centuries.

<sup>7</sup> Athens killed the best of its sons: "Socrates' death is one of the most exalted memories of the mankind. What is true with the respect to the death of Jesus of Nazareth is also true with the respect to the death of this Athenian: he had to die so that he could win...That was the end of the man who beat the time...because he was looking toward eternity." (translation from Милош Ђурић, *Историја хеленске етике*, БИГЗ, Belgrade, 1976, p. 271-272)

<sup>8</sup> Saint-Simon asserted: "A philosopher ascends to the summit of thought; from where he can see what this world used to be and what it could become. A philosopher is not an observer...he is a participant of the first grade, for his opinion ... rules the human society." (translation from Ante Fiamengo, *Saint- Simon i Auguste Comte*, Naprijed, Zagreb, 1987 p. 33)

<sup>9</sup> Saint-Simon in his work *Lettres d'un habitant de Genève* argued: "With a genius ... love for humankind ... can make him perform miracles...Is there any better way for a man to get closer to the divinity?"

<sup>10</sup> Plato asserted that philosophers are people who broke free from all personal ambitious and selfish passions. Aristotle said that they fight for "universal good," which our time of selfishness, accumulation of material things and personal pleasures has almost forgotten. We need spiritual revival of hope.

<sup>11</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam remained faithful to his principles in life despite all temptations of his time of total madness. Only great people can be the heralds of the days to come. Buddha told people to be light.

<sup>12</sup> In human history, the authorities have often been suspicious about people of knowledge, always demonstrating the attitude that domineering force has to the magnitude of knowledge and fruitful cognition. However, one should be reminded of the wise words of J. S. Mill in his essay "On Liberty" warning that "no great things can be achieved by small people."

<sup>13</sup> Greek philosophers knew that knowing oneself is the most difficult thing, and the question is which is more difficult to know – oneself or universe. The universe cannot be known without the man, not the man without the universe, for the universe is personal, and personality is universal.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment. He served 27 years, spending ten long years in solitary confinement. Every day he worked in a quarry where sharp flakes of limestone were sticking in the white and pupil of the eyes. Never losing his spirit, Mandela managed to win over the guards and ensure better treatment for the prisoners. He gave lectures on overcoming fear, psychological problems of prisoners, and started to teach both guards and prisoners how to read and write. His faith in success, in building a democratic South Africa was so strong that nothing could change his mind, not even when the authorities forbade him to attend the funerals of his son and mother. For more, see М.Стефановић, *Мандела два века*, Беопринт Петровић, Belgrade, 2006 and *Светска енциклопедија мира, том I-II*, Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства, Belgrade, 1999

will hear, though, since they reach the very bottom of the mankind's souls and realize the magnitude of the secret of Existence. They are brothers in spirit, regardless of the languages they may speak or write<sup>15</sup>, or centuries or classes they may belong to. The council of great people belongs to the hall of immortal worlds and God of dear people. They are fathers of their nations, beloved by centuries. That brotherhood of Spirit is honoured by slaves and masters<sup>16</sup>, servants and patriarchs, soldiers and commanders, sinners and saints, poets and scientists, rebels and those despised by mob, and favourites with the universe. The leaders of the world drive history<sup>17</sup>; they are the beacons of centuries and the second name of their people. Historical characters are coloured in dazzling colours and warm words; because only ordinary people deserve moderate and lukewarm words. The giants of our race are among those people who do not leave anything the same after them, whatever they touch is changed forever as if by magic, but at a heavy price for their personal life and destiny of the closest friends. With genuine human suffering and resistance of created beings, giants of centuries, with no exception, have to give up many personal, beloved, given and, first of all, dear things for the sake of higher flights of freedom and new days of light. Instead of the well-beaten tracks of continuation, they choose to walk along unknown paths of life and thorny pieces of soul, to move toward the land of Truth, which few have ever dared to explore, but where many innocent souls suffer. Great people experience an agonizing painstaking journey through life<sup>18</sup>. The giant of centuries is a great character, brave man, who is unshakably convinced in the rightfulness of his ideas; he is a man who keeps going forward without being distracted by those trying to persuade him to give up that sublime path. The gigantic hero demonstrates an iron-like determination of his character, the power of mankind and strength of delusive freedom, none of which has many admirers among humans. The great man has to be valiant, resolved, bold, curious, unsatisfied with himself, his era and people, one who changes everything towards new dawns, better people and brighter fields of freedom. The giants, respected throughout centuries by truth-seekers, have enough courage, defiance, strength and love to leap into the land of freedom. However, they are not alone on their journey. May their friends earn due respect and honour for their solid power worn as

a shield, with so many daily and inherited hardships, devastating doubts and questionable meaning.

The man of freedom, a faithful seeker in a search for truth, justice and secrets of the world, cannot but perish because he always speaks in the words of a new era, so that he is rejected in his environment and persecuted by those in power; the authorities may imprison him or take his life, the mob give him unworthy and shameful names attributing to him dishonest deeds and mark him by seals of insult, because it is easier to destroy the other one than to change oneself, community or established society<sup>19</sup>. The journey which the giants of mankind take is an odyssey of a lonely man, a painstaking ascent along the paths of thorns, with many terrible obstacles, dishonourable imputations, and overwhelming suspicions by mediocrity, too much intentional problem-making and too little secret help. The man, like the light of centuries, has always been alone as are the leaves of long-necked grass growing on top of a sharp rock lashed by stormy winds of Meaning. Overloaded with heavy burden of doubts and human dilemmas, on the burning paths of disclosing veils covering the secrets of life, he takes the journey of endurance for the brave ones where there is little joy of life or splendour of a day. The giants of mankind are prisoners of silence, admirers of solitude, self-questioning<sup>20</sup>, and rare moments of bold joy, because, in critical days, the Lord never abandon aides of Light or those who perform feats in the world, for were it not for the power of the Creator there would be no truth in human existence<sup>21</sup>, nor arts or knowledge, nor buildings, firm communities or healthy offspring. Great men are independent and original, in youth, they have their role models but they outgrow them in a creative way, because those who imitate others are a mere shadow of the majestic Truth and genius of the world. Excellence of spirit and masterpieces are mirrored in uniqueness, integrity, sublimity and conquest of unexplored frontiers of liberty<sup>22</sup> set by old times and people. Aristotle's<sup>23</sup> attitude toward Plato is the best example<sup>24</sup>. The giants of spirit

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that some of the most important people in the whole mankind did not write a word, but they spoke so wisely, spiritually and socially engaged themselves so strongly, and had so many faithful followers that they made an impact on the centuries to come; to mention just a few: Pythagoras, Socrates, Confucius, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed.

<sup>16</sup> "It is incredible that the thoughts of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius are so similar..." Б. Расел, *Историја западне филозофије*, Народна књига, Алфа, Belgrade, 1998 (opr. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western philosophy*), p. 248

<sup>17</sup> Hegel said that history should be interpreted in the light of the feats of individuals that are important for the history of the world. Those are the people whose goals represent historical changes that have to be made in their time. Hegel asserted that Great Man is the main instrument of Spirit in history. Great people are practical, political, contemplative people who know what is necessary, and when the time comes, because they understand history better than anyone else does.

<sup>18</sup> Many magnificent successes of mankind should be attributed to appalling deprivation and modest life conditions, because they have often been stimuli to superhuman achievements. Therefore, love those current shortages, weakness, and temptations that will yield great deeds. Many wise men, among them industrious Ibn Khaldun, thought about this.

<sup>19</sup> Search for novelties can cost any truth-loving man, who respects justice, freedom and knowledge, his life, or at least can inflict enormous suffering, pain and sacrifice on him. However, whatever the man does, he should do it fully aware that it will be judged by the centuries and starry skies. People dislike any attempts at changing the existing state of their community.

<sup>20</sup> Marcus Aurelius: "As emperor, he dedicated his life to the stoic virtue. It required an impressive moral strength, since during his rule the country was stricken by disasters – earthquakes, diseases, long bloody wars, rebellions...His *Thoughts* ... proves that he felt his public duties as a burden and that he also felt very tired. Some of his *Thoughts* were written in the military camp on campaigns to distant lands, which for him were source of suffering and probably caused his death..." (translation from Б. Расел, *Наведено дело*, p. 248)

<sup>21</sup> This thought is close to the words of the Bible: "If God does not build home, masons will be trying in vain", and "Nothing can exist without God, for if God does not safe-guard a town, no guardsmen in front of its gate can save it."

<sup>22</sup> A genius exceeds the frontiers of his country and his epoch. He leaves an indelible mark of existence by resolving fateful contemporary issues as well as complex questions of the very sense of human actions.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle is a great character of the world, not only in the area of philosophy but also in the area of spirit. Karl Marx called him "Alexander the Great of Hellenic philosophy". He seems to us to have been the wisest man ever.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, as an autonomous character, could not agree on all issues with his teacher. Anyway, it is difficult for spiritual colossuses with such brain not to clash in the field of spirit. Philosopher Branislav Petronijevic wisely remarked: "such spirit, different and independent, as Aristotle's could not accept Plato's teaching without criticism."

et their equals<sup>25</sup> and connect with the ideas of historical characters, since tradition<sup>26</sup> is needed for epoch-making works, and giants-to-be lean on the shoulders of those who precede them. Plato admired famous Socrates as much as Alexander admired Aristotle. These great men represent a logical chain of development of Hellenic and world's spirit in general. E. Celer wisely concluded: "if Socrates is a lavish germ, Plato lavish flower, and Aristotle a ripe fruit, then Alexander is a deliverer and planter of the fruit worldwide."<sup>27</sup> There are no giants of the world without brothers in spirit. Great people are relentless in creation on the planet, exalted magicians of words, thoughts and deeds. "...In his life<sup>28</sup> he wrote so many pages that it would have been hard to believe it has been written by one man only if their authenticity had not been confirmed... Aristotle wrote nearly half a million lines, which is about ten huge volumes"<sup>29</sup>. All centuries that came after him lived on Aristotle's knowledge, climbing on his shoulders to discern the truth. An extraordinary man of excellence can bring immeasurable good to his race, faith, country or civilization. We should not forget that the man is a building block of creation<sup>30</sup> and that sometimes he is not aware of how much of his creative zeal and fruitful energy is hidden in his spiritual flight and profound thoughts. Fortunately, the giants of the world (Aristotle, Hegel, Heidegger, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare) had timely recognized their gift and dedicated their valuable life to fertilize it. Nothing

that God has given to the Man is without a reason. Nothing is given with the bad intention that gifts of spirit should die, unfertilized, overlaid and empty, when the person physically leaves this world. That exceptional value of the One is meant to be passed as the most precious gift on to new generations open to fruitful new knowledge.

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#### Conflict of interest

We declare no conflicts of interest.

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<sup>25</sup> Aristotle's life was marked by his acquaintance with Alexander the Great. Aristotle's meeting with young Macedonian prince was one of the greatest moments in the history of mankind: "It was a meeting between a philosopher genius and a military genius and creator of the world...those two greatest Balkan men... would give, with their deeds, the content and form not only to their time but would also, with their victories – the disciple in the military area of conquest and the teacher in the area of philosophy, have a decisive influence on later development of European education". (translation from Милош Н. Ђурић, *Александар Македонски као екуменски космотворац* in the Collection *Кроз хеленску историју, књижевност и музику*, Космос, Belgrade, 1955, p. 71)

<sup>26</sup> "...Tradition is a universal spiritual basis without which societies, cultures and civilizations cannot exist or survive. It is expressed throughout history in the course of creative communication of thoughts, values, works and goods...Tradition...is capable of transferring contents lying beyond direct experience through unlimited time". *Енциклопедија политичке културе*, Савремена администрација, Belgrade, 1993, p. 1204

<sup>27</sup> For more on Alexander's childhood, upbringing and education see B.I. Wheeler *Alexander the Great The Merging of East and West in Universal History*, New-York-London, 1908, p. 18-63

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle did not have a long life, he lived 62 years only (384 – 322 BC). Thomas Aquinas did not live more than 48 years (1226 – 1274). History of philosophy has recorded some other early settlers: *Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) lived 42 years, Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662) 39 years, and Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677) 45 years. It is amazing what some people can accomplish in their short lives, while others live a century, passing through life like thirsty grass that drinks dew or a joyful butterfly that flaps its wings. All this is a puzzle of life and the man in it.*

<sup>29</sup> Милош Ђурић, *Историја хеленске етике*, БИГЗ, Belgrade, 1976, p. 377

<sup>30</sup> Creation is the most difficult part. Issues of the world, man, universe, life and death, beginning and end are so complicated that no man, however great, can grasp the depth of the puzzles of Existence and successfully deal with them. It is from this fact that contradictions, discrepancies and confusions in the thoughts of great people arise. They do not only result from weakness of thinking man but also from the world which cannot be reached, the world which feeble human thought has been persistently trying to get a grip on hoping to outwit it. Be gentle to the people and merciful to everyone's work.