

18 ON THINGS HUMAN

by Torgny Segerstedt

¹The articles which Torgny Segerstedt, the editor of the newspaper, *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, wrote in the years 1933–1945, were published in 1948 by Norstedts in one volume: *Mänskligt*. [An exact translation of the Swedish title into English is not possible, but it means approximately “On Things Human”. Note by the translator.] This book should not be unavailable in any bookshop. It has its given place in every home library.

²The following is a collection of loose quotations from Segerstedt: a few gleanings from this powerful book. There are many truths in it that cannot be told too often.

³Disgust with culture is a disease of the psyche that has affected many individuals in our days. It accompanies culture as a shadow through the ages. It readily fumbles its way back to primitive conditions.

⁴Our urge to create has the love of destruction as its seamy side. The foremost creations of cultural work call forth this perverse urge to destroy the most strongly.

⁵The foremost creation of culture is the rule of law. It is being destroyed. The ignorant, those of scant judgement, the masses are now to decide what is right and wrong, just and unjust.

⁶Thought is to be drilled. The press, the radio, and the cinema serve the aim of forcing on people the opinions they should hold according to the views of those in power.

⁷Many people are in despair at the triumph of loudmouths all over the world. The path to influence is smoothed by bluster and boasting. That the masses should be so gullible! Apparently they have not understood that as long as custom prescribed the praise of reason and humaneness, everybody acknowledged these powers. Even those who were profoundly out of sympathy with the ideals mentioned feigned respect for the idols of the times. You could get on in the world more easily by behaving like all the others. What an empty cult of appearances this was became manifest when violence could fight its way to power. Then its brutality was uncovered. And the hour of self-assertion struck for the low and vulgar things that had been curbed up to then. They took the offensive against that reason and humaneness to which they had bowed thitherto with deep-set hatred.

⁸Sometimes, however, it is necessary that brutality, vulgarity, and stupidity pluck up courage and attack. Then humaneness and reason are forced to fight their immemorial enemies. The representatives of the former had thought that everything is in good order and relapse into barbarism is out of the question. That is always a mistake, however.

⁹It is strange to see how many people prove themselves cowards when some serious matter is at stake. Then they say that they must show consideration because of their position. The oddness of it is that consideration always has to be shown to the stupid and the prejudiced, never to the wise and broad-minded. The latter are meek and mild, so they can be safely ignored. The former, however, must be rubbed the right way lest they become aggressive. But those who have been given positions of trust have not received them to lead comfortable lives. If quiet and peace reign around them, it is a sure sign that they do not fulfil their duty of being a salt in the community. Not much of a man that is not hated and slandered.

¹⁰You may respect the individual person in his capacity of human being, not in his capacity as practising a profession. If a waster has an important calling as a meal-ticket, you surely need not esteem him for the sake of the profession he neglects.

¹¹Those professions are the most dangerous where the people practising them have positions of authority. Power blunts self-criticism. Any criticism is taken as a personal attack. No criticism irritates people more than the one they feel to be legitimate. Besides, no one should plume himself. No human being is always respectable. Also, respect is demanded only by those who feel insecure. Stupidity alone demands respect. The others manage without it.

¹²Those who appeal to people as human beings arouse opposition to which they will succumb. They energize powers from whose grip they wanted to set people free.

¹³We live in an “ordered world” and not in one where the sense of justice and the respect of human lives are allowed to upset settled habits.

¹⁴“Christianity makes people respectable, helps them get on in the world, is an excellent means of advancement.” And theologians lap up such praise as a welcome acknowledgement of the loftiness of their faith instead of being seized with righteous anger at such degradation of their religion by the utilitarian viewpoint.

¹⁵Rule of law is the condition of that civic uprightness on which the social order ultimately rests. When a free nation has manifested its own will to live in laws and administration of justice, the continuance of society is guaranteed. The sense of right and justice has got itself into people’s blood, and the vital functions of the community are emanations of the will to live of the nation.

¹⁶When arbitrariness enters the judicial system, this loses its binding character. Whenever irrelevant viewpoints are allowed to influence the making or administration of a law, this severs the bond there is between the nation’s will to live and the administration of justice. Violence and bias may mask themselves as the partisans of the public welfare or of a political system; justice, however, does not acknowledge them.

¹⁷Feeling secure when possessing freedom and justice, they did not pay close attention to them. It is around the banner of justice and freedom that the struggle has been waged ever since the dawn of time. Everyone must choose his stand. Here there is only an either – or, not a both – and. Our choice depends on our position: whether we have risen to humaneness or are lapsing into barbarism. All great things that human beings have thought, all beautiful things they have created, all good things they have desired, all of this rings like a battle song in the defence of justice.

¹⁸The day when censorship is introduced there will be no more stories but those adjusted to the arbitrariness of the rulers. No newspaper will be able to print what it knows to be what is true and what really happened. The abolishment of free speech and the freedom of the press is worse than a crime, it is a blunder.

¹⁹Nazism demonstrated the risk of too strong organizations in society. The German trade unions could raise no opposition to Nazism because people were weaned from a personal opinion, accustomed to obedience, non-commitment. In political matters the masses went along when one of the pack took the lead. Independence was nowhere to be seen. To follow had become their second nature. But to let others do your thinking for you is risky business.

²⁰Expressions of the same mentality are everywhere to be seen. Our nation has had enough of partisanship. The party press writes as it is being told. Some journalists who are party members even boast about their obedience. “Party loyalty” is what they call their surrender of individual judgement. Sometimes they call it “sense of responsibility” when they brush all responsibility aside.

²¹When we see how people without any fuss put in all their powers, risk their lives, and more than their lives, for something that reaches beyond their individual existence, freedom, and right, it affords us certainty that life contains something the existence of which we often had reason to doubt. They show that the quality of being human includes not merely small and paltry things, not just what arouses disgust and cold despair, but also that quality for which we have but one name: greatness.

²²The appeal to the “verdict of history” carries no risk. We shall not live to hear it being pronounced; a bitter truth to those who felt themselves stoned by unfair opinions, a pleasant one to those would have reason to fear its final judgement (often exceedingly different through the ages).

²³Likewise, it is useless to claim that “there is impartiality in the verdict of the future”. The poor weak human beings who live some decades, centuries, or millennia after an event they are trying to reconstruct are hardly better equipped to pass impartial judgements on it than its contemporaries were.

²⁴Human beings do not pass the judgements of history; the events themselves do so. The future will largely be a continuation of the contemporary assessment, sometimes grotesque, of people and their work. The hoots, the shouts, the hoaxes are inseparable from human life. Why be annoyed at the fact that people measure themselves and all their work with counterfeit measures?

²⁵(The esoterician may add here that individuals of the fourth natural kingdom are in no position whatever to pass just judgements. Not even the members of higher kingdoms try to do so. The law of sowing and reaping attends to that matter. In the long run, throughout the incarnations, everything will be reaped unto the last grain. What happens is the result of causes in the past.)

²⁶The absence of political maturity, of that degree of culture in parliamentarians which self-rule requires, clears the path for those who set themselves as guardians and guides of their nations. Jeppe looks grotesque in the baron’s bed. He is dangerous as a leader of the people.

²⁷A man has a right to die for an idea, but not to sacrifice the lives of others on the altar of his idea. (That mistaken view has characterized the dictators of all ages.)

²⁸It is not fortunate if the entire press of a country is divided along party lines in such a manner that each newspaper is in the employ of a certain party, is its mouthpiece, and pleads its cause. That is what is happening with the Social Democratic press. Its task is to advocate the collective opinion of the party and make propaganda for it through thick and thin. In the employ of Social Democracy the press is exclusively an instrument for the assertion of the party opinions and the glorification of the party executive.

²⁹The democratic type of society is afflicted with so many weaknesses that a constantly watchful critique is necessary if that society is not to degenerate. Such critique cannot be exercised by a press that is shackled by considerations of party politics.

³⁰The non-socialist press has a wider task: to bring on a greater consideration of public interest and a greater respect for objective facts.

³¹The slogan, “liberty, equality, and fraternity”, combines irreconcilable opposites. Competence grades all. Equality is out of the question. Only in our days, under the banner of Social Democracy, has equality asserted itself with a disregard for liberty. The competent are always few. When numbers become decisive, the banner of equality is raised. Equality is a religious idea, not a social one. All souls share the same eternal value. Their demand for human dignity is well suited for a battle cry, since nobody denies it. But how should they grasp it? The mass movement is loath to gradation and desires a system in which all are equally bad off. Progress stops and stagnation ensues.

³²Brotherhood must be based on a complete renunciation of all thought of recompense in any form. Nothing is more fully evidenced than the fact that hatred grows out of the sowing of kindness. The experience of millennia is summed up in the proverb which says that the world repays by ingratitude

³³It is beyond the power of experience to implant moral qualities in people. The only thing that experience can achieve is to make people adjust to reality.

³⁴The public swallows indiscriminately what is being offered to it in the matter of information and opinion. Ordinary people forget from the one day to the other what they hear and read, and are carried like fluff by the wind of the press in one direction today, in another tomorrow.

³⁵Why did our gracious God pick this very planet to be an asylum for criminal psychopaths? Was it particularly suited for that purpose or was it merely because some place had to be reserved for crazy fellows to romp about in?

³⁶At any event, the inhabitants of this planet behave like criminal psychopaths. All nations are feverishly occupied with the preparations for killing each other.

³⁷The hopeless feature of the matter is that when a nation is seized with this madness, the others are forced to go along with it. No nation can leave its home unprotected if the neighbour is showing all signs of planning an attack. So it all starts running. And we have moved in this circle since time immemorial. Whenever a sensible voice is raised, idiots start screaming furiously that war and murder are man's highest duty, pillage and destruction man's true calling.

³⁸There is not the slightest doubt that all of those movements which go by the names of bolshevism, fascism, and national socialism are epidemics of the mind. Less well-balanced nervous systems have no power of resistance and succumb to the disease. Judgement is more or less put out of working order on certain lines, the power of thought is paralysed. The sick person's confused ideas move only along certain ready-made lines. The patient behaves in a scornful and bullying way against those whose psyche does not exhibit the same pathological changes as his own.

The above text constitutes the essay *On Things Human* by Henry T. Laurency.

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Endnotes by the Translator

To 18.1 Torgny Segerstedt (1874–1945), D.D., was a Swedish theologian and professor of the history of religion. Politically a liberal, he was a prominent and undaunted critic of socialism, whether it assumed an internationalist form as in Russia or a nationalist form as in Germany. See also the endnote to paragraph 4.4.8 of the essay *Theology in Knowledge of Life Four* by Laurency.

To 18.18 Segerstedt wrote his words on censorship against a background of stark reality and personal experience. Because of his uncompromising rhetoric against German national socialist policies, during the Second World War eight issues of his newspaper were confiscated by the Swedish government who tried to maintain strict neutrality between the warring parties.

To 18.26 “Jeppe looks grotesque in the baron's bed.” This is an allusion to *Jeppe paa Bierget eller den forvandlede Bonde* (*Jeppe of the Hill, or the Transformed Peasant*), 1722, a famous comedy by Danish-Norwegian philosopher, historian, and playwright Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754). Jeppe is a peasant who is henpecked by his unfaithful wife. In his misery he resorts to heavy drinking. One day the local baron and his servants find Jeppe dead drunk and asleep on his dunghill, and decide to make a social experiment. They carry Jeppe to the baron's manor, where they put him, still asleep, in the baron's bed. When he wakes up, they behave as though Jeppe were the baron. Jeppe, recently the most scorned and humiliated member of the community, lets himself be taken in by this charade and is rapidly transformed into a petty tyrant. The moral of the play – that unqualified people, if invested with power and authority, soon become unbearable despots – is told by the baron in the concluding verses. Segerstedt and Laurency both assumed their readers to be familiar with Danish and Norwegian literature in the original languages (which are very close to Swedish), since this was on the curriculum of Swedish secondary school.