

IMPACT, RECOGNITION, FAME

Consider the story of Ralph Alpher, who died this year at age 86. He was a theoretical physicist, known as the “forgotten father of the Big Bang.” His papers, part of his doctoral dissertation and published in 1948, showed how to find evidence for the explosive origin of our universe: the uneven distribution of hydrogen and helium, and a residual background radiation. Few believed him, no one looked. Only in 1965 did radio astronomers Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson discover the radiation as a pesky hiss in their radio equipment; but they didn’t realize the significance of what they’d discovered until physicists at Princeton told them. Guess who won the Nobel Prize. In 1999 Dr. Alpher spoke of the ache of being ignored: “Was I hurt?” he said. “Yes! How the hell did they think I’d feel? I was miffed at the time that they’d never even invited us down to see the damned radio telescope.” One month before he died, he was awarded the National Medal of Science at a White House ceremony. He was too ill to attend.

Impact, recognition, fame: three very different achievements, all driven by ambition, all influenced by circumstance. *Fame* is the most arbitrary, most superficial: think Paris Hilton (“famous for being famous”), think Britney Spears (to paraphrase Euripides, “Whom the Gods would destroy, first they make famous”). But fame is what people seem most to crave, in the celebrity culture of our times. Beginning with Hollywood, then television, glossy magazines like *Life*, *People*, *Us*; all showing off the glitzy life styles of the rich and famous, so the rest of us could enjoy fame vicariously. Now driven by consumerism and instant mass media (YouTube, MySpace, Internet blogs), anyone can achieve a certain degree of notoriety, however small or brief. More and more people are aiming to do just that, including – ominously – mass murderers. Pop artist Andy Warhol’s prediction years ago seems to be coming true: that soon everyone on the planet would enjoy fifteen minutes of fame.

Recognition is just one step up from fame. Awards, proclamations, medals, are meant to convey society’s appreciation for something you’ve done. It could be a Congressional Medal of Honor, an Oscar, a gold watch, a gold star for a high school essay, or even a simple coffee hour at the office or church to salute your good work. Medals go in the drawer, plaques up into the attic, and memories of the moment fade. Recognition can also come too late. Consider the famous novelist, Doris Lessing, who finally, just this year at age 88, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the world’s most prestigious honor for writers. “So now they’ve decided they’re going to give it to me. So why? I mean, why do they like me any better now than they did [before]?” Vincent van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime, and that to his brother. Emily Dickinson wrote nearly two thousand poems, but only ten were ever published while she lived, all anonymously. “How public, like a frog,” one of her poems says, “To tell your name the livelong day/ To an admiring bog!”

In the end, it is *impact* that counts, which we should want as our legacy: to make a *positive* difference – whether on the whole world, or within our community, towards friends and family, on our children, and on all our descendants. Some people go for the top prize, ‘saving the world,’ a god-like ambition the Greeks called *hubris*. But making a difference is seldom a solitary undertaking. As anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” On a daily basis, the Talmud reminds us that teaching just one person is like teaching the world; saving just one person is like saving all people, because the good we do will surely come after us. We’ll never know when or how or how much, but it doesn’t matter.

Yet it is nice to be noticed, remembered once in while. As Charles Wright’s poem (“It’s Sweet To Be Remembered”) tells us: “No one’s remembered much longer than a rock is remembered beside the road/ If he’s lucky.../ Still how nice to imagine some kid someday picking that rock up and holding it in his hand/ Briefly before he chucks it/ Deep in the woods in a sunny spot in the tall grass.”

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