

MASTERFUL EXISTENCE—GRACEFUL ELOQUENCE

This eulogy was delivered at the memorial service for Vice Admiral James Stockdale in the U.S. Naval Academy Chapel, in Annapolis, Maryland, on 23 July 2005.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests—Sybil and the sons of Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale—again, thank you for this trust.

Permit me to speak in the name of God: creator, redeemer, and comforter. Moreover, for just a moment allow me to hold a lantern above our loss. We have gathered to celebrate the life of a great man in a chapel he was no stranger to and a man whose journey of faith never stopped moving.

Admiral James Bond Stockdale knew this as a place that directs us to One greater than ourselves, to one Who reveals himself through the sacred text, and to one Who requires much. He understood the classroom forms the thoughts of man while the sanctuary of faith forms the soul of man, both being essential for the formation of character so one can persevere under any circumstance.

Writing to Timothy, a young and struggling Christian leader in the infant church, the Apostle Paul wrote:

In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

When we survey the landscape of history, looking at the epics of time we recognize that God, in his wisdom, graces the stage of humankind with a servant given to living the noble life. I can only surmise God's intent is to provoke our conscience and call forth from his creation a meaningful manner of living life in this gymnasium of existence.

The elder sage, Solomon, wrote poignantly about those seeking to convey truths with just the right words. He said, "The words of the wise prod us to live well. They're like nails hammered home, holding life together." I would submit to you, this is indicative of the life of Vice Admiral Stockdale. His is a life of masterful existence and graceful eloquence.

However we knew him, we knew him to be a man of words. Whether tapped on a wall, written, or spoken, his words confront you. They agitate the mind, they stir the soul, they disturb our complacency. They also, however, call forth the best in us, instructing us to live a life worthy of our calling. Just as a pebble dropped into a pool of still water sends out ripples, likewise his collection of thoughts extend their influence into many realms.

Yet, his wisdom, born of academic rigor and forged in the hermetic, is for anyone to peer into and learn from—it is, however, a choice. God does not mandate we learn from the sages, though at our own peril we disregard their prophetic voice of wisdom. Yet, the invitation is: “he who has ears, let him hear.”

I have asked myself on many occasions if there is one central lesson from the Admiral. What is it that his life “speaks of”? What is a common thread running through his speeches, writings, and discussions? In prison, was it unity over self? After Vietnam, was it his passion for education? Was it his desire to cultivate officers to become moral leaders? On the other hand, did he want to agitate the minds of leaders to confront their own moral foundations so they might determine whether they had built on sand or rock? Whatever it is for each of us, I believe his life echoed the words of two men: Marcus Aurelius, who mused, “What can guide us through this life? Philosophy, only philosophy,” and then that of the biblical writer James, who wrote: “I will show you my faith—by what I do.”

I consider myself a most fortunate man to have been invited into the winter of his life. Though we shared a common conviction that “holding the moral high ground is more important than firepower,” my first lesson contained no such discussion. At the invitation of Sybil and the Admiral, I joined them for their customary Sunday evening meal, which was more of a “meeting of the minds.” As we gathered around the table, the printed lesson was placed in my hands. I wondered what great philosophical or theological concept we might discuss. The topic that evening? Death. Later that night, while I was on my way home, I reflected on what he had taught. Though it is a simple lesson, the ramifications are considerable, that being, the certainty of death teaches us to live life with purpose and intent—as God has given.

Ladies and gentlemen, his is a life of masterful existence and graceful eloquence. He understood one does not worry about establishing a legacy, but one must be concerned about the life lived. Therefore, let us listen to God’s servant, for “though he is dead, yet still he speaks.”

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