

## Whom Do You Serve?

A week from today, some percentage of Americans will celebrate Memorial Day, an official holiday of the U.S. government. That day, all of those who have died while serving in the U.S. military are honored. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, observers of the holiday have placed flowers on graves, and, in recent years, the President has placed a wreath in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

The number of people who actually observe the holiday, in the sense of taking the time to remember “those who have died while serving in the U.S. military” is probably small. The number of those people honored who had a clear idea of whom they were serving when they died is probably high.

A fair question to ask of the rest of us then is “whom do we serve?”

Matthew 6:24 in the Christian Bible reads: “no man can serve two masters...you cannot serve both God and mammon,” mammon understood to mean wealth. I suspect that many faith traditions and philosophies share similar sentiments. “A person cannot pursue both material goods and spiritual well-being. The two goals are mutually exclusive” is the explanation in *Wikipedia*.

Do we, People of a Certain Age, believe that? Are there not examples now and historically of deeply spiritual and ethical people successfully pursuing material gain? Have we not, in our own lives, looked after our material needs while striving to sustain a moral or religious center in ourselves (if moral or religious can be substituted for spiritual)?

In recent years, we have heard myriad expressions of gratitude directed toward people who are perceived to have served. “Thank you for your service” is a frequent comment directed toward any person who has served in the military, or first responders, like police, firefighters, even health care workers during the Covid pandemic.

It would not be a stretch to extend that gratitude toward people in many jobs performed during Covid who exposed themselves to infection, serious illness, even death. Teachers, refuse collectors, grocery store employees, social workers working with the homeless; the list is long of those who have served at some level of risk to themselves.

Whom were they serving? One answer, of course, is others. Maybe that is the main answer. To be sure, those who died while serving in the military showed a level of commitment to the country. But who constitutes the country if not people other than themselves?

It is a reasonable assumption that most people will act in their own self-interest most of the time. Most species do. Most people have a survival instinct, a preference to live rather than give up life. We also have the capacity to act altruistically, for the benefit of others.

The term “self-serving” carries negative connotations but sometimes action serves both self-interest and an altruistic end. A soldier might fulfill a sense of duty by serving the country; a self-interest benefits a larger cause.

So, again the question, whom do we serve? And how? For surely, in our actions, we are serving some “master.”

At a July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration several years ago held at a nearby Army base, the President of our Rotary Club (Kapolei Sunset) described his recent trip to Ethiopia as a part of Rotary’s worldwide project to end polio. He and other Rotarians handed out small paper cups of the vaccine over several days. Before the Howitzers punctuated the *1812 Overture*, he delivered a comment more powerful than the guns.

“It was transformational, standing there, handing mothers and kids a dose that would protect that little life,” he said.

I replied, “Seems like you’ve had something akin to a religious experience,” and he agreed. I was wrong that evening. He had a Rotary experience.

In the February 2023 issue of *Rotary*, Rym Dada-Husseini, past president of the Tripoli Cosmopolis Club in Lebanon, made a similar point. Speaking about a water project in his country to writer Arnold Grahl (p. 16), he pointed out, “What is good about Rotary is we don’t deal with religion or politics. We deal with each other as humans.”

Mr. Dada-Husseini was commenting, of course, on his home country, where competing religious and political sides have often complicated action on behalf of the citizenry. But his is not the only country where religion and politics have divided people.

In nearly 30 years as a Rotarian, I remember a few of the many speakers who have enlightened us and fewer of the parties we had to celebrate occasions. I remember all of the times I was part of service projects, starting with the first one, painting houses that did not belong to a friend or me and in which I did not live.

A strength of Rotary is focus. To help others is the point.

Perhaps therein lies a more precise application of the lesson from Matthew in our lives. Helping others is serving a master. Many people, including ourselves, benefit when we focus on others as well as ourselves.

On Memorial Day, we honor those who served and died in that service. Might it also be a day to reflect upon ways in which we can serve others, “dealing with each other as humans?”

Submitted by Daniel E. White May 22, 2023

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