

WHO'S THE MAHATMA?

--Mahatma. Noun. In South Asia, a person who is regarded with reverence or loving respect. A holy person or sage.

Derived from the Sanskrit roots “maha,” meaning “great,” and “atman,” meaning “soul,” yielding the word “mahatman,” which is shortened simply to “mahatma.”

Usually associated with the historical figure of Mohandas K. Gandhi, the Indian activist who, in the 1930's and 1940's, through non-violent civil disobedience, led the successful Indian cause of independence from British rule, as in “Mahatma Gandhi.”

Mahatma. Meaning, literally, “great souled.”

--The notion of “mahatma” is not at all part of the apparently heated conversation that is taking place among the disciples as they are on that road to Capernaum. Mark uses the word “arguing” to describe the specific character of the back-and-forth exchanges, the subject of which reportedly has to do with who among them “was the greatest” (9.34).

Apparently, as they walk along, each of the disciples is presenting the case for his own candidacy for that title--which is the surest evidence that nothing even-remotely mahatma-like is going on there. That sort of insistent self-promotion, that sort of imagined self-importance, is perhaps the clearest proof that one is dealing with a small soul, that one is plainly up against a large ego but not a large soul.

That is why Jesus seizes the teachable moment with the paradoxical words, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (8.35). Now, there is the “great souled” answer to the original question. Authentic personal greatness has to do with a certain surrendering, submitting, serving, as personified by each of the distinguished “great souls” that have emerged over human history.

It is obvious, then, from Jesus' critical response to those disciples that what he has in mind for his truest followers is that they be “large souled.”

--It seems patently obvious that anyone can be a small soul.

It requires little effort, minimal concentration, no fore-thought or self-discipline at all to behave like a small soul. In fact, it could be said that our world is quite densely populated with small souls, and they are witlessly responsible for all manner of obtuseness and injustice and suffering--just the types of thing that Jesus would have us working against, or that Jesus would have us remedying.

Being a small soul is probably the easiest, most natural thing that there is, hotwired as it is to blind instinct and self-centered impulsiveness. It means harboring and feeding the darkest and dimmest thoughts that we have. It means blurting out the first thing that's in one's mind, no matter how ill-advised that might be or how adversely that might affect someone else. It means behaving in manners that serve one's own narrow, selfish interests, while the basic needs and open wounds of others remain forever unconsidered and unaddressed.

Why, absolutely anybody can do that. Everybody can already do that--which is no doubt why Jesus calls us to something different. We're not to be like everybody, you know. We are equipped to be something higher, something greater. If we truly are following on his venerable path, then it is expected that we will be different, that we will operate on a higher plane than what is widely observed in our world, a world where quite simply there are too few “mahatmas” of any stripe.

--We hear specific detail regarding all this in Paul's Letter to the young congregation at Rome. Apparently he's got issues there with some particularly small-souled people. His letter is a holding up of a mirror in front of them so that they can see just how they are. He takes pains to bring into consciousness for them what typifies the great-souled--what their priorities are, how they operate in the world, what their deeds look like.

Great-souled people, says the apostle, love genuinely. They hold on tightly to that which is good and honorable and noble, knowing how easily such values can slip through the finicky fingers of lesser souls. Great-souls go out of their ways to show respect for and to be compassionate towards all people--familiar and unfamiliar, "good" and "bad," near and far.

Regardless of the personal sacrifices that might be involved, great-souled people are energetically committed to actions that benefit others, liberally contributing in whatever available ways that insure that the real needs of others are satisfactorily met, and showing particular hospitality to even the strangers in their midst.

And great-souled people have the remarkable capacity to persevere through times of individual suffering, to resist their natural inclinations towards acting superior or entitled in any fashion, to labor sincerely for the best for even those who are the harshest and most wicked towards them personally--so, refusing to participate in the silly and unproductive dance of tit for tat, choosing against the vicious, unending cycle of eye-for-eye, wrong-for-wrong, evil-for-evil that is ordinarily the default setting in many a human heart.

Truly, if the world were populated with great-souled people, it would be a vastly different one from that which we know and participate in daily. It would be . . . well, like God's coming to earth, reorienting, restructuring, and renewing everything. Quite simply, the "Realm of God" is but the fertile product, the fruitful habitat, of the great-souled. Where the great-souled gather and are at work, that holy Realm appears.

--For all Jesus' teaching and for all Paul's exhorting, however, the real possibility of that Realm, for us, seems still but a hazy dream.

The fact remains, though, that, in this world of ours where there are too many small souls, someone has got to step up and be the mahatma. Oh, we're not called on to be another Gandhi or Buddha or Muhammad or Jesus, but we are strenuously invited to become a kinder, grander, nobler version of ourselves. We are nudged, as it were, to set loose the "mahatma" embedded in each one of us from the beginning.

In the whole array of our problems and predicaments, if we are ever to find our ways forward as individuals, then someone has got to take the higher way. If we all continue merely to settle for remaining small-souled, there is precious little hope for us. If we are ever to advance as humanity, each time--on the open highway, across the kitchen table, in the market check-out lane, and everywhere else where people interact, and inevitably come into conflict with one another--someone must choose the role of being the bigger person. In a world overpopulated with small souls, someone must accept being the "great soul."

To repeat, positively anyone can be the small-soul. The abiding question in every tense or tricky or tortured situation is always the same: Who's the "mahatma" here? Who will be the "mahatma" here? Regardless of what the circumstances may be, who will choose to be the great-soul?

Perhaps us?

Or perhaps you?

Could that be you?

Will it be you?