

HYMN TO THE IDEA

J. PIAGET, 1916

[EXTRACTS ONLY, A.K.A. MISSION OF THE IDEA]

The Idea surges from the depths of our being. The Idea overthrows kings and priests, raises the masses, decides the outcome of battles, guides the whole of humanity. Everything is Idea, comes from the Idea, returns to the Idea. The Idea is an organism, is born, grows, and dies like organisms, renews itself ceaselessly "In the beginning was the Idea..." say the mysterious words of the Christian cosmogony.

Think of the force of the idea of freedom, of the untold numbers who have fought for it, of all those giants of the Idea who have imposed on whole peoples the plans of their fertile brains. The same for the idea of country, of justice. These ideas are indestructible and yet always new. To the blind the Idea seems unchanging. Poor and cold, seen from the outside, no one who tries can grasp it all, so great is its richness, so infinite its diversity.

Woe unto him, be he young or old, who has not lived for the Idea, for country, liberty, humanity, justice, religion. At the end of time those who have lived for the Idea will be together with God, all in peace. Woe unto him who will have deserted the side of the Idea.

Indignantly, revolted, the young man rejects hypocrisy, and egoism, seized by the Idea he is immensely free. This is the truly moral period of life. Later the compromises begin. But here and there a hero rises. Genius is the crystallization of the Idea in a man, the hero abandons himself to the Idea, gives vent to his rage against all that is mean, bourgeois, orthodox, conservative, in a word, reactionary.

The Idea leads the world. Action is the servant of the Idea, the crude instrument with which our limited nature must be satisfied, the means toward the advent of that glorious end which is the Idea. In the words he must use, the poet expresses only a small part of the beauty within him, killing the rest. Likewise action only captures the Idea in one of its aspects, and thus destroys the beauty of the whole. Progress springs from the brains of wise men, not from the arms of men of action. The Revolution was made in Rousseau's contemplative walks and not in meetings or uprisings in the streets. Then a man of action dies his work lives on just long enough to produce a few new men of action, paler and weaker than he. When a man of thought dies, his work sets off a thousand men of action, all armed with a new strength.

Cursed be the ruling classes, the orthodox, the reactionaries, the utilitarians, the sceptics. The ideal lives only by destroying one after another each particular idea, because each is only a fragmentary and provisional view wrenched from the whole. Pride and egoism lead those who hold power to cling to what they have, to what exists, and

thus they fetter the idea and betray their brothers When the idea is on the point of affirming itself it destroys all equilibria, threatens those who are established in the past. Cursed be all those who fetter the idea.

The winter traveller sees the cold, still world around him; the snow-flakes falling crazily. By turns he senses the emptiness and sadness of the world, feels himself filled with the painful bitterness of his solitude, is united in an immense sympathy with the snow around him, finds the calm of the idea that brings him closer to God. We fear that our efforts may be all in vain, we do not see the ideal, but we construct it nevertheless Such is life for the idea, painful, and fecund, for to suffer is truly to live.

Sometimes, the great ascent which humanity pursues generation after generation seems to halt. The idea is dying. The lonely traveller is overcome with horror, feels all resistance in him melt, becomes suddenly a weak and suffering being shaken by the passion of his fright. When a facile lie kills the idea, the people, leaderless, rush toward carnage and catastrophe, then ask who is to blame for this madness and crime. The voice of orthodoxy tells the people, stop, do not change what is, conserve the heritage of the past. The shapeless flock of conservatives accept, agree. Insane, to believe that progress has come to a halt! Selfish to cling to the comfortable nest of the past! Down with these hypocrites! They are the ones responsible for the faltering of progress, inertia and crises, the misery of the people, war among nations. They are the ones who make the evil that kills the world, the enfeeblement of the idea.

It is not the politicians who are guilty of the war, not the peoples, not even the military fanatics, poor brutes, not the narrow patriots. It is everyone who has fettered the idea. To let the idea act, or rather to 'make it act, is to render impossible crises such as today's, because the Idea and life are naturally directed toward love and sacrifice. It is the conservative spirit which is guilty, which has arrested progress, forbidden work for world peace, maintained armies, destroyed faith and the dignity of man. Without the conservative spirit the people would not have remained in their misery, they would not have been faced with an obstinate bourgeoisie, ignorant of its duties. It is the conservative spirit which is guilty because without it woman would be equal to man, and never would the horrors of this century have withstood her. The conservative spirit killed the idea, it is the cause of war.

When the idea is reborn, every man now suffering in the shadows will find his place in the vast harmony which by its crescendo will make life grow, so high that it will see God. But the rebirth of the idea requires the help of everyone Metaphysics is not an aristocratic art. The scientist, who finds hypotheses, must build over them a grand edifice that can contain them; the Christian who in the depths of his heart has felt a life, must assimilate it by an interpretation which justifies it; the moral man, who wants a rule of conduct to govern his life, must construct an idea to justify it. The special mark of each man must be his idea and from these ideals, numerous as the cells, the true idea will come forth, like the soul from the body.

Source: The Essential Piaget, Eds Gruber H.E. and Voneche J.J.