

AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL WHO WOULD BE REFORMERS (1910)

S. Handy Perinbanayagam

My dear Friends,

I take it for granted that every one of you possesses at least the one qualification without which one can never be a reformer. I mean that you have that modicum of vanity which makes you imagine that you are better than your fellows, and that you have your quota to contribute to the sum of human progress; in brief, that you possess that simple qualification in wanting to be a reformer. I want to make another simple assumption about you, which also I am sure that at least in some vague and indefinite manner you feel that this world of ours is not what it can be and much less what it ought to be, that you have faith in human nature and have realized the infinite possibilities of perfection that are innate in man. I am not sure which of these assumptions is the more fundamental, but I know that they are both not without importance. If any of you who read this lack either for these essential traits of the reformer, you will do well to leave me and my words alone and go your way.

Bearing these two assumptions in mind I shall endeavour to point out some other qualifications which also I think you ought to possess if you really mean to do some thing in the world. In truth, some of the propositions I shall here after enunciate are contained in the assumptions that I have made the basis of my whole argument, they are corollaries derived from the basic propositions. My first assumption, the one about personal vanity, I shall restate in another form. Of course, you cannot be a reformer by merely wanting to be one. Also, you will not be a reformer if you do not want to be one. It is a truism that you must want to be a reformer, before you can be a reformer, but the mere desire to be a reformer will not result in your being one, any more than the desire of a child who wants the moon for playing results in its becoming the owner of that much coveted play thing. Although it is true that no man has ever achieved everything that he wanted, it is equally true that a man has never been anything or got anything without in some manner wanting to be it or to get it, however vague and undefined the wish might be. Granting that you want to be a reformer and that you think that the world in which we live needs reform, what further qualification do you need if you are to accomplish your purpose of reform? Here is my answer.

First, do you feel the evils and the wrongs which you want to set right with a personal intensity? Is it a passion, an agony, an all absorbing religion with you? Does this religion transfuse every fibre of your being? Do you feel these wrongs as personal wrongs? For example when you see an untouchable treated with inhuman callousness or cruelty, do you feel it as an insult to your own self, as an affront to the divinity in you? Do you feel the blow as if you have received it? Or, if you want to emancipate this country from the foreign yoke, do you feel with all the strength of your being that the treatment meted out to the humblest of your brethren is a personal wrong to yourself? Is your desire for the liberation of your country from its cultural, political and economic bondage an all-consuming fire, which burns at a red heat in all your being? If you do not feel these things with the personal intensity which I have tried to picture very imperfectly you simply cannot be a reformer. Your imagination is enriched, your nature ennobled, and your sympathies intensified only if you feel the wrong of others in your own person. Without a sympathetic imagination it is impossible for you to see the needs of the people whom you want to serve.

Second, do you know the forces which are arrayed against you? Do you know the abysmal depths of the innate and subconscious selfishness of human nature, and the tenacity with which mankind clings to traditions and customs merely because man refuses to think? Do you know the deep seated blindness to other people's needs which you see in the so called higher classes, whether it be the higher castes, or the potentates of the British Empire, or the princes of capitalism? How naturally they think that their province is to enjoy privileges and comforts, which are theirs simply through the toil or perhaps the starvation or even the death of others among the children of God! Have you not seen a man seated in a rickshaw, his nether parts protected from rain by a tarpaulin, flinging curses at the rickshaw coolie who runs as fast as he can through mud and rain? His lordship, who is inside is not satisfied with the speed of the rickshaw man; hence the shower of curses, as if the shower of rain were not sufficient annoyances to the poor coolie, how naturally and gracefully does the cursing become his Lordship inside the rickshaw! Also, have you not seen now meekly and how

like a worm which has no right on this earth of immortals (like the occupant of this rickshaw) does the coolie increase his speed and splash through mud and through water, panting for his very breath? Do you not see that he thinks that his being drenched through and through, the mud bespattering his clothes and his person, and his Lordship sitting inside flinging eloquent curses, his boots, trousers, and person immune from the shower – that all these things are according to the disposition of a just and benign Providence? If ever you have the temerity to suggest that things could be otherwise, and that they ought to be otherwise he would laugh you to scorn, and perhaps would believe you more readily if you told him that from a certain day forward the sun would rise in the west and set in the east. To come nearer home, have you not noticed how naturally and unhesitatingly your high caste man kicks the pariah, and how naturally and with what unquestioning servility he submits himself to this treatment, and how shocked the pariah would be if you told him he was the equal of the high caste man, and that hence he ought to resent any violation of this sacred rights as a human being? To take another example, supposing you told one of your farmers that he has a right to be the free citizen of a free country that he may be the pioneer of freedom in this country, that he may be a Washington or a Cromwell or Gandhi, that he can help to eliminate the Durai who is tyrannizing over him and for whose wine and tennis he pays his taxes, the man will forthwith declare you to be insane, or dismiss you with vague nothings and when you have turned your back on him will give the knowing nod and the discerning smile of the superior. In short, do you know the age-long servility and apathy of those whom you want to rouse to a realization of their own worth and of their rights?

Now, to state the other side, if his Lordship in the rickshaw, or the high-caste gentleman, or the British bureaucrat got an inkling of what you have said, what is your lot? The rickshaw lord may challenge you for a duel if he pays you this compliment. The Vellala gentleman will have you cudgeled by the retinue of ruffians, in some of whom, perhaps, you had tried to imbue a sense of their own worth. The British bureaucrat will have you arrested and perhaps deported or imprisoned for treason against His Majesty's government. So, then, to put the matter in a nutshell, do you realize the abysmal selfishness and egotism of the privileged classes against the battlements of whose special citadels you are directing your attack? Have you not seen the apelike violence and ferocity with which they defend their privileges? Have you not seen the selfishness of these people express itself in all its lurid and ugly colours when the merest trifle of their privileges was in danger? On the other hand, I have drawn

your attention to the indifference and servility of the people whom you want to help, be they the starving labourers, or the untouchables or the people of the subject race whom you want to set free from the shackles which have been imposed upon them by man's diabolical lust for power. Intimately blended with this selfishness and egotism is another quality which I would describe as Pharisaism. I mean, a desire for respectability, a wish to be well thought of by others, an inclination to be angry with anyone who dares to differ from the rest of the world – the hatred that normal animals have for freaks who do not conform to the natural types. I refer to the complex feeling of animosity, defiance, vindictiveness, malice and wounded respectability that led the Pharisees to crucify Christ.

Third, do you know that the obstacles that you ought to fight are not material, but spiritual and intellectual, not physical and corporal, but physical and intangible, not men but men's thoughts and impulses, not the illusion which we call matter but the reality which we call mind, the spirit, or whatever other name you may choose to give to the non material essence of your being. The task before the reformer is not to change physical objects but to transform mental attitudes. You cannot do away with slavery unless you first do away with the slave-mentality of the slave, and the slave-owning mentality of the slave-owners. Likewise you cannot do away with the British bureaucracy unless you first change the bureaucratic mental attitude of the imperialistic Englishman and the servile mental attitude of your cringing countryman, or at least one of these complementary attitudes must be changed so that they cease to be complementary to one another but become mutually antagonistic until the stronger impulse prevails over the weaker. Our will to freedom and not our armaments, the zeal with which we want to be free and not the money which we squander on furnishing, a navy and an army, the intensity of our wills and not the immensity of our wills and not the immensity of our physical and material resources are the things that count. The real question is, do we honestly wish to get rid of the evils against which we declaim vehemently. Do we not in addition to our reforming zeal have also a sneaking desire to derive some personal benefit from the evils which we profess to eradicate? Whether the evil be a personal sin or a national sin, the reason for its persistence is our conscious and unconscious and subconscious compromise with the ideal which we have in our minds. Do we not, like St. Augustine, pray to be saved from a sin, all the time reserving our right to commit that sin, at least once more? Is not this compromising attitude at the bottom of all our failures? Do we honestly and sincerely will the things which we say

that we do want? If so, nothing can stand in the way of achieving our aims. When you are sure of what you want, pursue it with all the energies of the conscious, un-conscious, and sub-conscious parts of yourself. Have you never asked your friend for a loan and even when he did not help you as desired, have you not gone away happy because in a silent conversation between your soul and his soul, your soul had come to know that he would have given you what you wanted if he could have? Or again, have you not got what you wanted and yet gone away unhappy because in some manner or other you felt that the spirit of the giver was not happy? In both these cases what really mattered was the spirit of the giver. That is what I mean by saying that, after all, the material is an illusion and the eternally true is spiritual and the non-material your will and your soul? I do not, however, deny that material things have their role to play and have their reactions on the spirit of man, but in estimating their relative importance there is no doubt in my mind that the spirit of man is the more potent factor. So then, do you realize that what you want to effect is not a change of things but a change in things – a change of attitude toward things.

Fourth, having realized that your task was to bring about a change of mind, how are you to do it? Whatever people may say about the supremacy reason and intellect, do you know that the stronger part of your non-physical being is your emotional self and not your intellectual self, your feelings and not your thoughts? For example, do you not know in an intenser sense that sugar is sweet, that fire scalds your fingers, that your mother loves you, than that any one side of triangle is less than the sum of the other two sides, or that the meridian of Greenwich is the basis of some certain geographical calculations? Would you not die more willingly to vindicate the honour of your mother than to establish the truth that three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles? The sweetness of sugar and the love which your mother has for you are parts of your personal experience. You have realized them, whereas you have simply understood certain facts concerning the Meridian of Greenwich and the properties of triangles. In short, do you know that realization and not demonstration is the supremest proof of reality, be the reality spiritual or economic, political or social? Your task as a reformer, then, is not merely to convince people, but to convert them, so that they themselves may carry on a further campaign on your side, to create not merely an intellectual response but throbs of emotion? If your cause has appeal only to the human intellect and not to the emotions and the imagination, you would do well to give up all idea of reform and take to something more sensible like farming or cattle-

breeding. It is not my purpose to decry reason, but I know that its role is minor to that of the imagination and emotions. Of course, the perfect appeal is to man's entire nature, the imagination, the emotions, and the intellect. Your appeal must contain a subtle fusion of reason with passion.

Fifth, now that we know to what faculty in man the appeal must be made there is another factor which ought not to be ignored, you know the extremely slow pace at which truth travels. Despite new methods of disseminating truth, such as the motorcar, the printing press, and the thousand other contrivances of science, the spiritual progress of man is not a whit quickened. These contrivances undoubtedly help in making public several aspects of truth, but the publishing of truth is not the same thing as the growth of truth. The response to ideals in the human heart is as slow today as it was twenty centuries ago, when mankind crucified the Prince among idealists. Tides of idealism dash themselves against the rock of human selfishness and meet today with as many rebuffs as they did in the middle ages or even earlier. So, then you must not expect that with modern facilities of travelling and the advantages of advertisement you can better the world with your motor cars, printing presses, skywriting, and other mechanical contrivances. If truth cannot be propagated in this manner, how then can it be propagated? My answer is, it can be done only through the spiritual force known as personality. Mankind, or at any rate, we of the East, have no loyalty to spare for institutions or committees. Our loyalty can be won only by a personality. A personality influences another by human contact and not through institutional red-tape. So, your duty, as a reformer, is to live with the people whom you want to help, and let them see you, feel your ideals, play with you, laugh with you, joke with you, and cease to fear you or to hero-worship you. Jesus of Nazareth did this, and the result is too well known to need any elaboration. One of these results anyway, is that all the disciples suffered martyrdom for the supreme Person who loved them, and whom they loved. The stories of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Vivekananda, of Gautama Buddha and Ananda are further illustrations of how personal contact was the impelling force in the lives of these men.

Sixth, do you expect to be thanked or recompensed for your loyalty to your ideals? If so, your folly is certainly to be pitied. The mountain in its serene height cares not to be thanked for the rains and rivers that flow from it and enrich the lowlands, filling them with plenty. The mountain receives its treasure from above, and scatters it on the plain below. Similar is your function. You must give because you are rich and over-flowing

and not for the purpose of earning interest or public thanks or public memorials. The mountain expects and receives no thanks from the lowlands it gratuitously enriches. It is always being filled and refilled to overflowing from above. Likewise shall you do. You receive from above and scatter it abroad. You will then be filled from above. Even as it is impossible that high mountains should get any recompense from the plains and lowlands whose needs they serve, so also if you are really a bigger personality than those you help, it is impossible for them to recompense you for what you do. The higher the mountain, the greater is its usefulness, and the less is the possibility of its being recompensed. In like manner, the greater the service, and the less chance of his being rewarded.

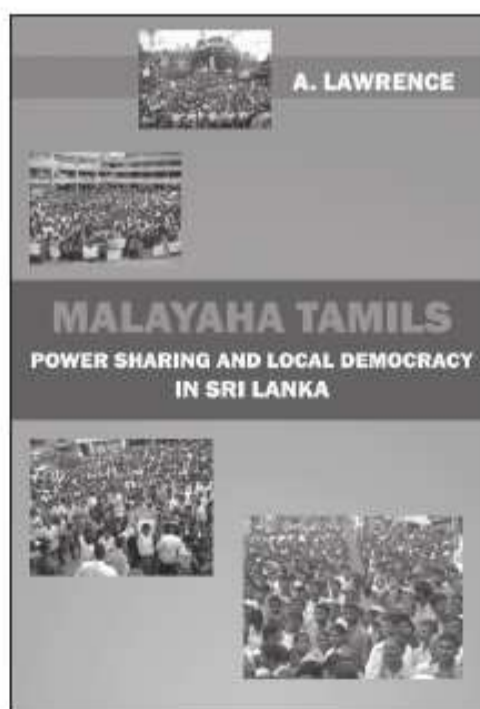
Lastly, do you know that you cannot serve God and Mammon? You cannot serve your ideal, and at the same time conform the vanities of the world. If you would be a reformer you must needs be a non-conformist. Do you know that it is just as impossible to serve God and Mammon, as it is to be in Colombo and Jaffna at the same time? You may be between God and Mammon, as you may be between Colombo and Jaffna, say at Anuradhapura. You may even be nearer God than Mammon, but under no circumstances can you serve God and Mammon at the same time. You must forsake one and leave the other, when you have once chosen your ideal,

your life from henceforward must be a living sacrifice to your ideals. You must become a personality consecrated to the service of your fellow man. Your surrender must be complete and wholesale. If you want to save others, yourself you cannot save. "He saved others, himself he could not save". These idle words, spoken by the jeering crowd around the cross, are perhaps the most concise expression of the Master's ideal of achievement. Incidentally let me caution you not to commit the error of confusing existence with life for we live in deeds, not in years. People argue that in order to be useful for a longer time we must not spend ourselves absolutely, and we should be careful about preserving our health and life. The only answer to such people is the life that has meant most to mankind was lived during the brief span of three and a half years, and that He who lived this life could have extended his physical existence if only he were persuaded of the wisdom and usefulness of such a course of action. I have dwelt on the thorny side of a reformer's life, not because I fail to see the roses that grow on the thorns, but because I know that the full-blown flower of the perfected humanity can be grown only on a thorny plant, and whosoever would undertake this task, let him not forget the thorns which are the indispensable part of the plant. Let him not imagine for a moment that this blossom can blow on a thornless shrub. ■

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S. Handy Perinbanayagam (1899-1977) was the principal of Kokuvil Hindu College and the founder member of the Jaffna Youth Congress.

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