

Has My Life Been Worth While?

Emma Goldman

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Have I wasted my life?

Measured by the ordinary standards of value, my life may be considered wasted. I have nothing in social prestige, wealth and power—that holy alliance commonly called success—to show for my struggle of forty-three years.

But then, I had never aspired to those treasures. I am therefore spared the bitter disappointment of those who had considered them fixed and unchangeable for all time.

Station, power, wealth—how inadequate they have proved! How useless and insecure!

The mighty of yesterday now standing before the world as the most successful failures of our age.

I had the good fortune at an early period to discover other values than the worship of mammon and might.

The ideal of human kinship that would brook no injustice or social wrong gave the only meaning and purpose to my life.

This ideal I found in anarchism. Not, to be sure, in the distorted image of anarchism presented in the Press and by pseudo-social economists or hounded and persecuted by the powers that be.

I found anarchism the moving spirit of beauty—of social harmony—of a free and untrammelled growth of the individual. This became my inspiration and my highest goal.

True, the light of anarchism now seems somewhat diminished by the bleakness of reaction so widespread in all lands. Its clarion voice is almost drowned by the hosannahs to the new deity come to redeem mankind—dictatorship, the complete subjection of man to its all-embracing dogma.

Yet anarchism has never before been proved so prophetic and true in its claims as now. The collapse of our industrial system and the complete failure of the State to cope with the miseries and suffering of vast millions have vindicated anarchism much more than we anarchists had hoped, even in our wildest dreams.

Production for profit is at last being challenged by conservative economists even. They now sing the refrain advanced by the great teachers of anarchism fifty years ago, to wit—that the genius of man in every field would in time do away with hard and exhausting toil. Two hours a day. A few days a week, they had insisted, would suffice to produce enough for all human needs.

Theirs were voices in the wilderness.

Now their thoughts have been taken up by the technocrats as their great discovery.

In the political field, too, advanced minds are at last realizing the growing danger of the State in its encroachment upon the rights and liberties of man. Autocracy, democracy, or social-democracy. All are proving the Justice of our repudiation of them as unmitigated evils upheld by organized coercion and force.

With such living proofs to sustain my ideal I cannot consider my life wasted.

“And your disillusionment in Russia?” I am so often asked. “The failure of the revolution you had worked for all your life?”

I can only repeat what I have written or spoken of my Russian experiences. I never expected anarchism to spring from the lines of Czarism. I had expected that the Russian masses would be granted the much-heralded Bolshevik promise of the right of self-determination.

The peasants had possessed themselves of the land. The workers had taken over the factories. Together with the soldiers and the sailors they had organized as free Soviets.

They had achieved this mot as the world has been made to believe on October 25, but in the period between the March and October revolutions. Verily, they had deserved well of the right of self-determination.

Instead they were given a dictatorship deadly in its effect on the revolution and the free initiative of the Russian masses.

In addition, they are not made to serve state, capitalism no less relentless and enslaving, than its step-brother in other lands.

Again I found anarchism vindicated in its faith in the innate possibilities of the people who alone can articulate the aims of revolution and direct it into constructive channels.

Having always worked towards that end my life has certainly not been wasted.

Then I have been asked: “Would not children and a home have helped you to achieve a greater happiness and satisfaction in your life?”

It is true that parents today are learning to enhance the physical qualities of their children. But their minds and characters they cannot mould. The antiquated system of education and our perverse social influences unfortunately do that.

In view of the numerous misfit and marred children these institutions have created, I am quite content not to have contributed any of my own.

Besides, my live for children has nothing to do with possession.

In point of truth I have a larger brood of children than the most prolific mother could have borne. The children of my comrades and friends and those of my family are as mine. I have their love and confidence and they have mine.

Motherhood in the true sense should embrace all children. Because so few realize this truth, child life is so empty of warmth, of love, of color, and beauty.

A home—what is it to-day but a cage from which most of its inhabitants wish to escape?

No, I should never have found happiness in such a place.

My ideals, the struggle for them, and whatever hardships and suffering they have brought, far from wasting my life, have enriched it a thousandfold.

To me it has been a grand adventure which I should not have missed for all the wealth in the world.

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