

A PROGRAM FOR CELEBRATING DR. ANNIE BESANT'S BIRTHDAY - OCTOBER 1, 1847

Note: The platform should be arranged as artistically as possible with flowers and a statue or large portrait of Dr. Besant in the middle. Two chairs should be placed on either side, one for the chairman and three for the three members chosen to take part. A silver tray should be placed in front of the statue or portrait and there should be kept handy a basket of loose short stemmed flowers so that the members who wish may file past the statue or portrait and place a flower in the tray at the close of the meeting. The meeting commences with some suitable music.)

Chairman: Today in many places throughout the world, Lodges will be celebrating the birthday anniversary of that great and well loved figure, Dr. Annie Besant, second President of The Theosophical Society.

Because the time is limited, we cannot dwell at length on many aspects of her colorful life, but three of our members are going to read short extracts from an article written by Phyllis S. Lean which appeared in the book, *Harvest*, published by the Institute for Theosophical Publicity in South Africa. When this is finished we will have two minutes of silence and then we will all rise and join together in repeating the invocation on unity written by Dr. Besant, "*Oh Hidden Life.*"

Afterwards, as they will be doing at our international Headquarters in Adyar today, those who wish may quietly file before Dr. Besant's statue (or portrait) and place flowers before it in silent tribute to one who did so much for our movement and for the world as a whole, and the meeting will thus conclude without any announcement or formal closing.

The excerpts to be read deal mostly with that part of Dr. Besant's life from the time when she found Theosophy. Long before that, however, she was an important figure in public life. Although time does not permit us to go into much detail, we should mention:

- In England Dr. Besant began the movement which today is almost universally accepted, the provision of school meals.
- She exposed the scandalous administration of the workhouses and drew attention to the misery of their inmates.
- She supported Charles Bradlaugh in his struggle to place the Truck Acts on the British Statute Book. (Truck system is a system of payment in goods or services in return for labor provided to an employer. Goods were often received from a company store which kept an employees account of credit and debit or payment was given in company paper script issued by the employer, and redeemable only at the employers store. People often became indebted an employer under this system for they were paid low wages, denied cash, in effect becoming like slaves or indentured servants;

the last truck act was enacted in 1896, permanently outlawing the Truck System in Britain).

- She also established Vigilance Circles - bands of good neighbors pledged to root out cases of cruelty to children and to focus the eye of authority on insanitary workshops and inhuman working conditions.

Today, accustomed as we are to the long years of social legislation, it is difficult to realize that these battles were fought only seventy odd years ago. In our admiration for Annie Besant as a great Theosophist we are not always aware of her great place in history, for truly she was one of the great social pioneers of the nineteenth century.

The review on the work Dr. Besant did for India does not show adequately the tremendous service she gave to that country. Today throughout India boy scouts will be holding special rallies to celebrate her birthday and in some places the celebrations will go on for a whole week with special meetings and gatherings; for it was Dr. Besant who founded the Indian boy scout movement. Likewise she founded the Young Men's Indian Association and there will be special public meetings organized by that body today also to pay tribute to their founder. Dr. Besant did much else for India, such as the founding of schools and colleges and bringing a new respect for the ancient ideals of Hinduism. This is quite apart from her political work towards the creation of an independent India within the British Commonwealth.

However, because we are particularly interested in Dr. Besant as a great Theosophist, let us hear something of her life from the time when she found Theosophy.

First Reader: Those of us who knew Mrs. Besant as a great Theosophist, as one of the most advanced spiritual leaders of the day, have sometimes wondered how she made the great leap from the workaday world into those more lofty halls. The explanation lies in the fact that even while actively engaged in social reform, Annie Besant was living her own rich and profound inner life pondering the new thought of her day, the findings of the hypnotists, the spiritualists and mesmerists.

Knowing her interest in such unusual subjects and the depth of her thinking, W. T. Stead gave her *The Secret Doctrine* to review. Her witty comment when deep in this Herculean task has survived. She wrote to a friend: "*I am immersed in Madame Blavatsky. If I perish in the attempt to review her, you must write on my tomb, 'She has gone to investigate the Secret Doctrine at first hand.'*"

Annie Besant joined the Theosophical Society on May 10th, 1889. She was forty-two years of age. Two years later Helena Blavatsky passed on. Her great friend and coworker, the first President of the Society, Colonel H. S. Olcott remained. Shortly after his death in 1907, Annie Besant, now sixty years old, succeeded him. For Annie Besant it was entry into a new life of tireless energy, unbounded

enthusiasm, triumph and growth. For twenty-six years she continued in office and between the two dates, June 1907 when she was elected President and September 1933 when she died, the Theosophical Society was consolidated, expanded and established in an impregnable position in the vanguard of modern thought.

So we find her at the threshold of this new and fruitful life. Looking back we can see the threads which led her, inevitably, to this point. The shadow of her future lay across her childhood. The discovery of truth through the use of psychic or mediumistic powers would not seem strange to the daughter of a mother who had followed her husband's funeral without leaving her house. The study of ancient philosophies would not prove difficult for one who, in infancy, had listened to a father reading the poetry and philosophy of the Classical world and who had herself, in girlhood, delighted in Plato. The devoted pursuit of the Path accords with those deep, but hitherto unsatisfied religious instincts so clearly shown in the young and lovely Annie Wood.

The bitter road she trod through Atheism and Socialism demonstrated with the clarity of sun upon snow, the necessity for establishing the principle of the brotherhood of man.

Her scientific training under Dr. Aveling and others was an essential preparation for the wider science of occultism she was one day to teach. Her intimate contact with the finest brains of her day, with men of the caliber of Bernard Shaw and Sidney Webb gave her, her measuring rod. Her campaign for the Secularists and the Socialists took hold of her native power of speech and molded it in preparation for the phenomenal task ahead of her, for she was to become the greatest orator of her day, with a power and sweetness, a sincerity and a conviction of unbelievable beauty.

She made her debut as a Theosophical lecturer at the opening of the lunch-club for working girls which she had persuaded Madame Blavatsky to establish. As far as is known the only record which survives of that day is the fact that H. P. B. and Oscar Wilde were both present, exchanging brilliant epigrams.

Annie Besant's facility as a journalist was turned to good account. For she became with Madame Blavatsky co-editor of *Lucifer*. Before the end of the year 1889 she was elected President of the Blavatsky Lodge in London.

Assuming the Presidency of the Society in 1907, it was not long before Mrs. Besant inaugurated the series of mammoth lecture tours which, more than anything else, were destined to consolidate Theosophical teaching.

In 1909 she spent sixty-three days in the United States delivering no fewer than ninety-eight lectures. In Paris two years later she enthralled a vast audience of over four thousand people assembled in the Sorbonne, lecturing in French on the

life of Giordano Bruno. In the fateful summer of 1914 she was in London, lecturing on Yoga, probably the first time that this subject had been chosen for a popular lecture. The Presidential lecture tours which continued year after year save only when interrupted by the First World War and by the exigencies of her service in India, concluded in the grand manner in 1927 when a few weeks before her eightieth birthday, the President visited every European section in twenty-one days, traveling by air and delighting in this new experience, giving fifty lectures in twelve different countries.

She was to come to Europe again, indeed several times more; to lecture in the Queen's Hall in London; to continue her ceaseless fight for India, and to grace the Ommen Camps with her presence, but never again to undertake so exacting a tour.

The constant traveling and writing never prevented Mrs. Besant from giving her fullest attention to the organization of the Society. She increased the Adyar estate from the original 28 acres to 266 acres, establishing gardens, developing every activity at Adyar in a thoroughly businesslike manner. In ten years she doubled the membership of the Society, her oratory and her books made Theosophy available to everybody, everywhere

Second Reader: Before we consider the depth and brilliance of her permanent message to us and to the world, we must examine, albeit briefly, her work for India.

In 1893 Annie Besant made her home in Benares and there started a publishing company and a school on property given her by the Maharajah of Benares. From this ancient palace she began her attack on the highest illiteracy rate in the world and from this beginning there grew the Central Hindu College, now, of course, the Benares Hindu University. From these earliest days she worked for the women of India and never lost an opportunity to revive Indian pride and self-respect and to foster the ideal of a United India. She insisted that social reform was an essential preliminary to India's advance towards Commonwealth Status and in 1913 delivered a series of lectures entitled "Wake up, India." Purchasing the old *Madras Standard*, Mrs. Besant renamed the newspaper *New India* and used it as a vehicle for the advocacy of social reform and Home Rule for India. The rest is history.

In 1930, Dr. Annie Besant, Mother of India, eighty-three years old, came to London and for over an hour pleaded India's cause before a great gathering of British Members of Parliament assembled in the Committee Room of the House of Commons. Constantly, throughout her long life, Annie Besant's path crossed that of the leading men and women of her day. In 1894 she attracted the attention of William Ewart Gladstone who commented upon her adoption of Theosophy in a long article in the *Nineteenth Century Magazine*.

She met Gandhi for the first time at Charles Bradlaugh's funeral in London. In 1915 Gandhi visited her at Adyar and expressed his keen interest in the printing works.

In 1905 Their Royal Highnesses, the Prince and Princess of Wales, later to become King George V and Queen Mary, visited her at the Central Hindu College in Benares. The Princess asked Mrs. Besant for her autograph and in return sent her a signed portrait of Edward VII. When the Central Hindu College received University status, the first honoris causa degree was conferred upon another Prince of Wales (the present Duke of Windsor), the second degree being given to Annie Besant herself.

In the summer of 1925, Mrs. Besant was in London and attended a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace. *The Times*, reporting the event said; "*The King took an early opportunity of talking to Mrs. Annie Besant, a striking figure with her uncovered white hair and white and gold robe.*"

A year earlier, in 1924, the jubilee of her entry into public life had been celebrated in London. Five hundred organizations were represented at the gathering; Dr. Besant had been actively associated with at least one hundred of these. Messages were received from Ramsay MacDonald and Viscount Willingdon, Viscount Haldane and Philip Snowden, Lord Baden-Powell and many others; George Lansbury, Margaret Bondfield, Earl de la Warr and many eminent Indians spoke of the inspiration she had been to them. Inspiration she was to be to many of them again for in 1927 she attended great meetings organized by the Malthusian League, the Indian Commonwealth League and the World Fellowship of Faiths.

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Third Reader: Margaret Cole has written: "*Annie Besant was in fact a saint. There are two kinds of saints; one kind keeps all the rules, is meek, pious, humble and obliging; the other kind is of enormous dynamic force, intense conviction having the power to move mountains, creating controversy, but when the shouting has died down is seen to be somebody quite out of the ordinary.*" The author goes on to compare Dr. Besant with St. Theresa or Joan of Arc and says, "*a cause which gained Annie Besant's support enlisted an army with banners.*"

Madame Blavatsky described her as "*the soul of honor and uncompromisingly truthful.*"

In every account and every memory of her, her beauty and her talent, her generosity and her tireless capacity for hard work are revealed. In the fields of politics and as an orator she was a genius.

Her permanent message to Theosophists is enshrined in all her books, but there are some little gems, perhaps forgotten. Here is a message she wrote in an autograph album: "*Work so that the world may be better for your living in it. Love*

all, but love most those who are unloving, for their need is greatest. Protect the weak and shelter the homeless; forget not our younger brethren of the animal kingdom.”

Most of us on our birthdays, expect our friends to send us greetings. Dr. Besant celebrated her birthdays by sending lovely messages to the world. Here are two of them. On October first, 1922, her birthday greeting to members was:

1. “My birthday greeting to you, brothers all the world over, is written from midst the encircling Himalayas. But not a vestige of them is visible, thick-shrouded as they are in earth-born clouds. Shall I then doubt that the mountains are there, that their green slopes, their mighty crags, their heaven-piercing peaks of snow are but dreams, imagination-fashioned? Nay, verily, for I have seen them, I have trodden them and I know. With equal certainty, with equal surety, I know the unmistakable truths of the Ancient Wisdom.”
2. “Think of the one who is dearest to you on earth, one for whom sacrifice is joy. Then remember that such debt of limitless love, such joyful sacrifice, is what we owe to all human brothers.”

Glimpses these of her recorded message; her whole life was dedicated to Truth, Liberty and Service; her way of living, her unrecorded message perhaps most challenging of all.

Chairman: Each year on October first we salute her memory; we speak in our Lodges of her wonderful life. Let us honor her always by remembering year by year, the greatest birthday message she ever gave us. Here it is. She wrote it in 1931, *“On each day and all day long during the coming year, I will try patiently to tune my life into harmony with that of the Christ within me.”*

Two minutes of meditation.

Invocation: O Hidden Life, vibrant in every atom;
Hidden Light, shining in every creature;
Hidden Love, embracing all in Oneness;
May each, who feels himself as one with Thee,
Know he is therefore one with every other.

Offering of flowers (Soft music might be played while the offering is taking place.)