

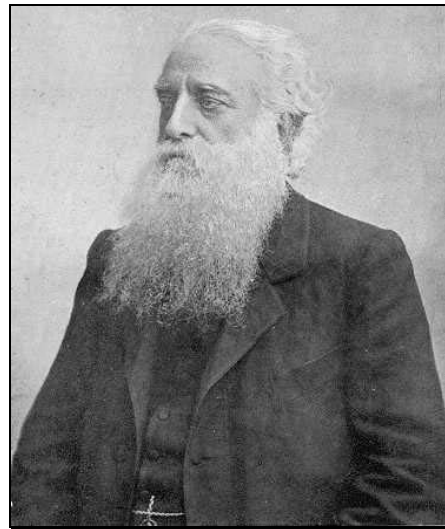
THE POWERS OF TRUTH AND DISCONTENT: LESSONS FROM THE LIFE AND WORK OF H. S. OLCOTT

By Anton Lysy

What is it then, which makes me say what in deepest seriousness and a full knowledge of its truth I have said? What is it that makes me not only content but proud to stand for the brief moment as the mouthpiece and figure-head of this movement, risking abuse, misrepresentation, and every vile assault? It is the fact that in my soul I feel that behind us, behind our little band, behind our feeble, newborn organization, there gathers a MIGHTY POWER that nothing can withstand—the power of TRUTH!

HENRY STEEL OLCOTT
Inaugural Address
New York City
November 17, 1875

Long before Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (HSO) met Helena P. Blavatsky (HPB) at the site of ongoing spiritualist phenomena in Chittendon, Vermont in 1874, he had been developing his critical thinking skills in different areas of endeavor. Prior to the Civil War, Olcott worked in experimental agriculture and published a book and pamphlet on *sorgho* and *imphee*, the Chinese and African forms of sugar cane. While such studies were central to the growing development of the scientific method during this time period, this also gives us insight into the defining qualities of Olcott. His study and mastery of refining required both discernment and sensitivity for isolating variables relevant to his experimental work. And his insights reflected his humanitarian hope to help the economic development of the poor by teaching them to cultivate these foreign plants.



Col. Henry Steel Olcott

During the Civil War, Secretary of War Stanton appointed Olcott to investigate fraud among military suppliers. Olcott's success in collecting evidence of what he later called the "Carnival of Fraud" would establish his reputation as a competent, thorough, and fair reformer. With these plaudits from the field, he was appointed as "a special commissioner in the Bureau of Military Justice" selected to examine the alleged conspiracy behind the assassination of President Lincoln in 1865.

After the war, Olcott studied law and applied the forms of legal reasoning from precedent to areas ranging from insurance to taxation. Established professionally in New York City, he turned back to his earlier interest in Spiritualism as an investigative journalist for *The New York Sun* newspaper. When he first glimpsed HPB at the Eddy Farm in Chittendon, he was in the midst of utilizing various tests that he had developed to detect any possibility of fraud in producing the spiritualist phenomena seen there. He marked cabinets with tape, for example, to allow him to measure the height of the apparitions. He was thorough in looking for any covert space under floors, behind walls, or above the ceiling that could be used for faking the phenomena. He timed the intervals between the appearances and exits of different apparitions.

These methodical precautions and his experiences in Vermont were later collected and described in his *People from the Other World*. He was clearly at ease with the motley variety of apparitions he encountered and described one occasion when he filled his pipe with tobacco for the apparition of an Indian woman named Honto who wanted to smoke.

...there stood a smoking squaw before us, in feature, costume, and complexion the type of her race, and with no more appearance of spirituality about her than any of the women in the room, who sat there regarding her with amazement. (194)

A further strong indication of Olcott's commitment to a broad concept of scientific objectivity and verification is reflected in his dedication of this book to two prominent English scientists who had shown interest in Spiritualism, Alfred R. Wallace and William Crookes.

The meeting with HPB, however, would initiate Olcott into even more abstruse territory beyond the realms of law, taxes, insurance, philosophy, and science. Their contact had produced ignition—their chemistry as a compound had "stirred up a great and permanent fire," according to the Colonel. The pair embodied two contrasting poles of being; energy, experience, and insight had been brought together to dance alchemically as the "Two Chums" — "The Esoteric She" introduced to the "Worldly He." After years with HPB as his tutor, Olcott would describe an encounter

with the astral body of an adept in *Old Diary Leaves* quite differently from his casual reactions to Honto and her peers:

... his eyes were alive with soul-fire; eyes which were at once benignant and piercing in glance; the eyes of a mentor and a judge, but softened by the love of a father who gazes on a son needing counsel and guidance. He was so grand a man, so imbued with the majesty of moral strength, so luminously spiritual, so evidently above average humanity, that I felt abashed in his presence, and bowed my head and bent my knee as one does before a god or a god-like personage. (379)

Clearly, determining the truth was extremely important to Olcott—honesty seemed to be part of his character as a seeker and not merely a policy. Together, Olcott and Blavatsky would form the hybrid heart of the nucleus of a grand plan for human development that would conceivably take centuries to unfold fully as our species slowly evolves and becomes all that it can be. For in getting to know her and to learn from and through her, an ongoing fire of creation had been generated that would be diffused through the society they were about to launch.

Olcott had started to learn in depth from the singular experiences of his Russian friend. Her guided travels around the world had provided her with firsthand knowledge of both esoteric and exoteric traditions. And, through the gnosis that radiated from her presence, an unprecedented vision of global interconnections and interdependencies slowly began to manifest in the interaction between these two humans who had both been born under the astrological sign of Leo. Olcott's own latent skills would later flourish as he traveled across the world for Theosophy and Buddhism.

This gnosis of transcendence was grounded on a distinction between the apprehension of absolute truth and the perception of relative truth. Knowing this difference firsthand was the fruit of the esoteric training HPB had received. She would later clarify this distinction in a paper entitled "What Is Truth?" originally published in *Lucifer* in February 1888.

To sum up the idea, with regard to absolute and relative truth, we can only repeat what we said before. *Outside a certain highly spiritual and elevated state of mind, during which Man is at one with the UNIVERSAL MIND —he can get nought on earth but relative truth, or truths, from whatever philosophy or religion.*

In his Inaugural Address, HSO alluded to this need for an elevated state of consciousness in what was probably an aside only understood by HPB:

Certainly the Theosophical Society cannot be compared to an ancient school of theurgy, for scarcely one of its members yet suspects that the obtaining of

occult knowledge requires any more sacrifices than any other branch of knowledge.

As he proceeded with his Inaugural Address, Olcott expressed his understanding of the critical and systematic approach inherent in the new Theosophical Society:

If I rightly apprehend our work, it is to aid in freeing the public mind of theological superstition and a tame subservience to the arrogance of science.

No, we are . . . but simply investigators, of earnest purpose and unbiased mind, who study all things, prove all things, and hold fast to that which is good . . .

We seek, inquire, reject nothing without cause, accept nothing without proof: we are students, not teachers.

THE POWER OF TRUTH

Fourteen years later and still the president of the Theosophical Society, a well-seasoned Olcott would assess the progress of the work in his article “Applied Theosophy”:

What the Society has hitherto done—its great merit in the eyes of some, and its terrible fault in the estimation of others—is *to make people think*. No one can for long belong to the Theosophical Society without beginning to question *himself*. He begins to ask himself: “How do I know that?” “Why do I believe this?” “What reason have I to be so certain that I am right, and so sure that my neighbours are wrong?” “What is my warrant for declaring this action, or that practice, to be good, and their opposites bad?”

The very air of Theosophy is charged with the spirit of enquiry. It is not the “skeptical” spirit, nor is it the “agnostic.” It is a real desire to know and to learn the truth, as far as it is possible for any creature who is so limited by his capacities and so biased by his prejudices as is man. It is *that* which has raised the Theosophical Society above the level of all other aggregations or organizations of men, and which, so long as its Fellows abstain from dogmatizing, must keep it on an altogether higher plane.

The fact is that the Theosophical Society attracts persons who have got a natural disposition to examine, analyze, reflect; and when this tendency does not exist—when people join the Society from special sympathy with one or more of its Objects—they very soon begin to ponder over the problems of existence, for they find themselves involuntarily and instinctively subjecting their own pet theories and cherished weaknesses to the process of examination which is the slogan of the Society.

By the time of HPB's death in 1891, the mighty power of truth was tied to three expressions:

1. THERE IS NO RELIGION HIGHER THAN TRUTH
(Theosophical Society Motto)
2. LOYALTY TO TRUTH
(Theosophical Society Creed)
3. TO HONOR EVERY TRUTH BY USE
(Theosophical Society Ritual)

Since its beginning, then, the Theosophical Society has been concerned with a global understanding of "truth" that would allow adjustments to be made for the different languages, myths, religions, philosophies, sciences, and theories that have emerged over the centuries of human history. The tradition recognizes the importance of esoteric spiritual practices that enable truth to "unveil" and surface internally and not merely be discovered through the senses. We must thus transform ourselves consciously, one by one, if the world is ever to embody the peace, wisdom, and knowledge that we can envision as the fruition of Brotherhood.

The importance of truth has continued to be diffused through the many disciplines that have emerged since the end of the nineteenth century. The TS had been one of the groups at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. A century later, the American Section of the TS was active in planning its centennial, the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions.

Many things had changed over the hundred years, but the importance of the mighty power of truth had not diminished. Spiritual leaders from around the world in attendance were presented a Global Ethic to sign as a universal commitment. Truth was embedded within one of "Four Irrevocable Directives" of the *Global Ethic*:

1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life.
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between women and men.

The mighty power that Colonel Olcott had felt in New York in 1875 was amplified in Chicago one hundred and eighteen years later, and compiled into a book by Dr. Hans Kung called *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of World's Religions*:

Numberless women and men of all regions and religions strive to lead lives of honesty and truthfulness. Nevertheless, all over the world we find endless lies and deceit, swindling and hypocrisy, ideology and demagoguery:

Politicians and business people who use lies as a means to success

Mass media which spread ideological propaganda instead of accurate reporting, misinformation instead of information, cynical commercial interest instead of loyalty to the truth . . .

In the great ancient religious and ethical traditions of humankind we find the directive: You shall not lie! Or in positive terms: Speak and act truthfully! Let us reflect anew on the consequences of this ancient directive: No woman or man, no institution, no state or church or religious community has the right to speak lies to other humans . . .

Young people must learn at home and in school to think, speak and act truthfully. They have a right to information and education to be able to make the decisions that will form their lives. Without an ethical formation they will hardly be able to distinguish the important from the unimportant. In the daily flood of information, ethical standards will help them discern when opinions are portrayed as facts, interests veiled, tendencies exaggerated, and facts twisted . . .

We must cultivate truthfulness in all our relationships instead of dishonesty, dissembling, and opportunism...(29)

THE POWER OF DISCONTENT

In his Inaugural Address, Olcott had also declared “. . . we found this Society in token of our discontent with things as they are and to endeavor to bring about something better . . .” Discontent with life has been a powerful source of motivation throughout history.

As a reformer in India, Olcott worked selflessly to bring the strands of Buddhism together. He designed a flag for Buddhism and wrote a catechism of the central tenets of the Buddhist tradition. He also worked to develop schools for the children of the Untouchable caste in India, the “Panchamas,” who were neglected. There were improvements to be made in all aspects of life and he was ready to initiate reform wherever he saw it was needed.

As we celebrate Colonel Olcott’s life this year, do we feel the mighty power of truth behind the Theosophical Society as strongly as he did in 1875? The challenges of life on earth may require us to reassess the assumptions we have made about the truth of many things. But the vision of brotherhood grounded in truth still has the

mighty power to make us work to change ourselves and to help the children and elders—all beings—who share our planet.

If human consciousness is required to generate the next stage of our evolution as a species, more and more of us need to have a long range commitment to a vision of cooperation and peace that does not waver when the inevitable resistance to that vision is encountered. Transformation will not come easily, so it is not wise to be foolishly optimistic. And since it will not come without a sustained effort requiring courage and persistence, it is also unwise to be pessimistic.

Our President-Founder and his Russian Guide set us a high standard to follow in their actions as well as their words and writings. Let us honor them by simply being honest, kind, compassionate, and altruistic beings that know in their hearts that ALL LIFE IS ONE AND EVEN THE HUMBLEST FORMS ENSHRINE DIVINITY.

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