

*A MESSAGE TO GARCIA* BY ELBERT HUBBARD

Elbert Hubbard's *A Message to Garcia* (1899) epitomizes the moral invective hurled by employers at unmotivated laborers that is common to late nineteenth-century America. With the rise of organized labor, that challenged the abuses of big business to monopolize both production and the marketing of goods essential to a society increasingly dependent on industrialization, many employers decided to turn to "moral persuasion." Lacking significant economic incentives and offering little else to their employees by way of substantial or real participation in corporate processes, the "bosses" of the time appealed to what they believed to be some innate sense of obligatory obedience to industrial achievement. This post-agricultural progressivism decries "the fire-brands of discontent" as "morally deformed," but lauds "the men who are striving to carry on *a great enterprise*, whose working hours are not limited by the whistle, and whose hair is fast turning white through *the struggle* to hold in line dowdy indifference, slip-shod imbecility, and the heartless ingratitude, which, *but for their enterprise*, would be both hungry and homeless" [emphases mine, DWF].

In his moral indictment of lethargic laborers, Hubbard not only fails to properly credit agricultural efforts in his Marxist "survival of the fittest" construct, he also mistakenly assumes that the proletariat accepts the motives and methods of industry's aristocratic elites, who, he admits, are prompted by "self-interest." For Hubbard, the crux of the problem with laborers stems from an "incapacity for independent action, this moral stupidity, this infirmity of the will, this unwillingness to cheerfully catch hold and lift . . . ." So he asks, "If men will not act for themselves, what will they do when the benefit of their effort is for all?" This belies Hubbard's acceptance of some sort of depravity intrinsic to the human condition, as well as a basic

selfishness and slothfulness that calls for moral correction. What he misses completely, though, is the connection between abusive industrial processes and the responses from laborers that he deplors. In his blindness, Hubbard chooses to invoke an obscure episode of the Spanish-American War that he caricatures into a moral fable for his own pro-management stance. But this speaks powerfully to his readers, since it invokes something positive to industrialists, that is, a successful imperialist surge by the United States into the Caribbean and Asian spheres.

Perhaps some limited benefit can be gleaned from *A Message to Garcia* for pedagogical purposes. First, initiative and persistence are key attributes to success, but their direct relevance to positive achievement may be challenged based on one's ideology or philosophy of "success." Second, it is true that, from certain anthropological viewpoints (i.e., the Christian view of man as possessing a depraved or sinful nature), there can be moral deficiencies that need correcting. Therefore, education can help by including moral lessons in the curriculum or instructional materials. Testing, likewise, should reflect this ethical aspect of instruction and the learner's competency therein. But from a much different foundational presupposition (i.e., the humanist belief that man inherently is good), "moral" instruction may be biased due to cultural and situational influences. Based on philosophical rather than religious grounds, virtue is believed to be necessary for an orderly society, but such does not represent any absolute value about how people should act in all circumstances. Testing, in this view, should therefore reflect the assumptions of an ambiguous and pluralistic ethical mainstream in society.

All in all, *A Message to Garcia* demands an alternative conclusion—that it is not "the world" that cries out for "the man who can carry a message to Garcia." Even according to the "historical" event, one man asked for a message to be delivered and one man carried a message

to the Cuban general. Hubbard, for his own purposes, overgeneralizes the episode toward universal applicability, a common error of moralists. The truth is that we know little more about “the fellow by the name of Rowan,” except that he rose to the occasion and performed magnificently.<sup>1</sup> The lesson from Garcia, McKinley, and Rowan is certainly to be found in acting decisively and positively *at the opportune moment*, but more than this would more than likely be idle speculation.

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<sup>1</sup>“Andrew Summers Rowan was an American Army officer and graduate of West Point class of 1881. After his service in the Spanish American War, he served in the Philippines and posts in the United States, retiring in 1909. He died in 1943.” “Elbert Hubbard’s *A Message to Garcia*,” available from [www.foundationsmag.com/garcia.html](http://www.foundationsmag.com/garcia.html); Internet; accessed 7 June 2001.