OS GUINNESS

SIGNALS *of* TRANSCENDENCE

Listening *to the* Promptings *of* Life

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THE LIGHTS OF HOME

Malcolm Muggeridge

Fatuous, preposterous, desultory—Malcolm Muggeridge was famous for the way he rolled his favorite words around in his mouth, savoring each one like a gourmand relishing a mouthful before delivering them in his incomparable way of speaking. Behind the rich currency of his speech was not just a love of language but a life rich in experiencing the things of which he spoke. He therefore took seriously only the solid and the proven. All else, including much that others considered solid, he had already weighed and found wanting—fatuous, preposterous, and desultory, in fact, compared with the rocklike realities he sought. On his tombstone are carved three words from John Bunyan that summed up his life and work, *Valiant for Truth.*

To all who had the privilege of knowing Malcolm Muggeridge, he was one of the most celebrated writers, journalists, and satirists of the twentieth century, but far more. He was a small man in stature, but a giant of originality, brilliance, courage, humor, and honesty—and utterly unforgettable.

"An egghead I came into this world," Muggeridge wrote of himself, "and an egghead shall I depart thence." His first memory in life was of walking down a suburban street in someone else's

hat—and the rage and heartbreak of that early feeling of displacement never left him. "I have always felt myself, perhaps to an abnormal degree, a stranger in a strange land." It left him, he said, with "the related feeling that the whole life of action, one's own and the society's or civilization's to which one happened to belong, is theater; a lurid melodrama or soap-opera with history for its theme."

The outcome for Muggeridge's view of life was profound. In his introduction to his book *The Thirties*, written from an army hut as World War II broke out, he confessed that he was unable to believe in the validity or permanence of any form of authority. "Crowns and miters seem to have been made of tinsel, ceremonial robes to have been procured in theatrical costumiers, what passes for great oratory to have been mugged up from the worst of Shakespeare." The trouble was that, in the eyes of others, such a disposition made him appear "ostensibly irreverent, pessimistic, disloyal, and—the commonest accusation—destructive in attitude of mind."

The same feeling gave Muggeridge the viewpoint of a maverick and the humor of a satirist, but it also formed a stubborn independence that never fell prey to fashion or consensus. He became the much-loved and much-loathed editor of *Punch,* Britain's humor magazine. No one was more impatient with humbug, no one had a keener eye for the absurdity of human pretensions, and no one could capture the emptiness of the carnival of human affairs like he did—but all with a passion for truth and without a shred of cynicism. As one biographer wrote, and he himself admitted, Muggeridge always knew what he disbelieved before he knew what he believed. He had sorted through things, discarding

the flimsy for the solid, the boring and predictable for that which was fresh and incongruous but true.

Muggeridge described his four years at Cambridge University as "the most futile and dismal of my whole life." Three years in India, perhaps the most religious country in the world, shattered any belief he had in religion. Two years in Stalin's Russia, to which he had gone as a fervent, young, utopian socialist, left his political idealism in ruins. (He was the first voice to report and denounce the horrors of Stalin's induced famines in Ukraine that starved more than four million people between 1922 and 1930.) Looking down from his editorial perch at the *Manchester Guardian*, he summed up the "dismal Thirties" as "a decade which began with the illusion of progress without tears and ended up in the reality of tears without progress." So much for the assured answers of education, religion, politics, and history. In a few short years he had seen through them all.

Muggeridge's reporting from the Soviet Union was remarkable for its bravery. History was to vindicate him fully, though he did not live to see the collapse of the USSR. At the time, his report triggered a hail of denunciations from all sides, including from intellectuals such as George Bernard Shaw, who claimed to have seen overflowing Soviet granaries and apple-cheeked maids working at them. Muggeridge described the *New York Times* correspondent, who received a Pulitzer Prize for his positive reports on Stalin, as "the greatest liar I have ever met." Throughout the decade, he felt he was observing the extraordinary fact that "the sun seemed to be setting on the Empire on which it never set." Walking through London in the dark days of the blitz with his friend Graham Greene, "I felt I was at the last bonfire of the last remains of our derelict civilization." Paraphrasing Rudyard

Kipling, he would say, "I saw the sunset ere most men saw the dawn."

The turning point for Muggeridge was the night he intended to commit suicide in Africa in 1943. As he tells the story in his memoir, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, he was turned down when he tried to enlist in the army in World War II. Instead, he was seconded to the embryonic Intelligence Corps, but sent to Lourenço Marques in Mozambique, far from any action that was either interesting or important. He was given the task of monitoring German shipping. Increasingly it seemed that his life amounted to a dire schooling in progressive disillusionment. "It was now that the absurdity, the futility, the degradation of how I had been living seized me with irresistible force."

One night, Muggeridge lay on his bed

> full of stale liquor and despair; alone in the house, and as it seemed, utterly alone, not just in Lourenço Marques, in Africa, in the world. Alone in the universe, in eternity, with no glimmer of light in the prevailing blackness; no human voice I could hope to hear, or human heart I could hope to reach, no God to whom I could turn, or Savior to take my hand.

He had no one and nothing to turn to. Suddenly the thought struck him. "Deprived of war's only solace—death, given and received, it came into my mind that there was, after all, one death I could still procure. My own. I decided to kill myself."

It was before the day of barbiturates, but, Muggeridge said, drowning would look like an accident, which would be better for his family. Driving six miles out of the small Mozambique town, he found a deserted beach, undressed and swam out into the cold, dark water. But suddenly he stopped. His last anguished thoughts

were of his wife, Kitty, back in England. Glancing back as he swam, he had seen the lights of Peter's Café and the Costa da Sol. He suddenly saw them as he had never seen them before, and they stopped him in his tracks. "They were the lights of the world; they were the lights of my home, my habitat, where I belonged. I must reach them. There followed an overwhelming joy such as I had never experienced before; an ecstasy."

He swam back. He would still always see the sunset before others saw the dawn. He would still always feel he was a stranger in a strange land, but the world was no longer entirely foreign. The lights of home had blinked to him in the darkness. In a world of absurdity and pomposity, there was hope, and he had to find its true source.

Was this a conversion experience for Muggeridge? Not at all. He would have snorted at the thought. It was years before he came to any satisfying conclusions about faith and life. But that night was the turning point. The experience, he wrote, was a "kind of spiritual adolescence, whereby, thenceforth, all my values and pursuits and hopes were going to undergo a total transformation." Deliberately or not, his words echoed Plato's parable of the cave. "In a tiny dungeon of the ego, chained and manacled, I had glimpsed a glimmer of light coming in through a barred window high above me." Having seen that glimmer of light, he threw himself into the quest to follow where it led.

Muggeridge never lost his sense of being out of place in the world. He never shook off the feeling that he was a stranger in a strange land. Indeed, he came to see how warranted that feeling is, and should be, for human beings. Yet if this world is not our home, then it is our duty to see through its flimsiness, its pretensions, and its pomposities. Perhaps we were made for somewhere

else, and for something more. But was there such a place, or was it a mirage? Like a flash in the darkness of the absurdity all around, the lights of the little café had signaled home and hope. And suddenly and intuitively, he responded to the signal by turning around in the water and heading back to the shore. His action was a quest for home, a bid for life and purpose and for the reason for it all—if there was a reason.

Malcolm Muggeridge was a long way from believing in anything, but the flash that spelled home was the signal of transcendence that stopped him from ending his life, turned him around, and made him a seeker. Could there be life and sunshine outside the cave? He had seen a glimpse of the sun from his cell, and that was enough to spur him to want to find out if there was a world outside.

A faith, a philosophy of life, or a view of life and the world, provides us with three things: meaning, belonging, and a story line. It helps us make sense of life. It gives us security in our world. And it unfolds the direction and purpose of our destiny on earth. It was the second of these that arrested Muggeridge. The lights of the little café had signaled and called to his heart that, across the wasteland of the earth, there was home. The signal of transcendence was an intuition, and the intuition was an invitation, and Muggeridge set out at once to find whether the signal led anywhere, and whether the home at the journey's end was real or an illusion.

The impact of a signal of transcendence is all important. It creates a seeker and shapes the direction of his or her search. When a signal breaks in, life raises a question that cannot be answered within a person's present frame of meaning. A seeker is born. Seekers are jolted into inquiring further than they have ever looked or thought before. The signal is the making of a seeker.

Not merely questioned, but called into question, people who hear a signal somehow know in their hearts that they are responsible to answer the question. They are being addressed as responsible human beings, humans not only able to respond but unable to ignore the challenge to respond. It is the very thrust and intensity of the question that creates the seeker and directs the course of the search.

Years later, Malcolm Muggeridge, in his own words, "rediscovered Jesus" and became a Christian—through the influence of friends, such as the reformer Lord Pakenham, and great saints, such as Mother Teresa. It was Muggeridge who brought the little saint of the Calcutta poor to the world's attention through his television documentary *Something Beautiful for God*. But his journey had begun all those years earlier, in the dark waters off the coast of Africa, when the signal of transcendence punctured his overwhelming sense of estrangement and futility, pointing him toward home.

Home and "a place for us"—there is immense power in the signal that points toward home and belonging. There is no hearth like the hearth of home, as the Irish saying goes. But remember that each signal of transcendence sounds out its own special call. No signal is a signal for everyone to hear, so one person's signal is another person's silence. Be ready, then, for the call that comes to you in your own life. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.