



The Measure of Humanity

Rachel Hackenberg

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“The question, ‘What is man*?’ is one of the most important questions confronting any generation,” began Martin Luther King, Jr. “The whole political, social, and economic structure of a society is largely determined by its answer to this pressing question.”

King was presenting the first of two addresses to the 1958 gathering of the National Conference on Christian Education of the United Church of Christ, reflecting on the nature and purpose of humanity. Are we animals? Are we a “cosmic accident”? Are we gods or fools, angels or sinners? He quoted Psalm 8 with its ancient question, “What are human beings that [God is] mindful of them?”

In his second address to the gathering, King developed this existential question—examining not only the condition of our being but also the character of our living. How do we make choices, set goals, and mature in such a way that we can live with ourselves? How do we labor together to support each other’s well-being, to recognize and address global needs? “As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich,” King declared. “As long as diseases are rampant . . . I can never be totally healthy. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.”

To be human, with integrity, is a noble life.

To be humane, with mutual compassion, is a worthy life.

To be humanity together, King asserted, not only with integrity and compassion but also with hope in the mystery of God, is a complete life.

Quite often I greet the morning with existential questions: pondering my flesh and bones, critiquing my faults, evaluating my purpose and its worth, faltering to understand my little piece within the grand puzzle. King’s *The Measure of a Man* returns me to

the essentials:

To be human is to be a miracle, a complex chemical mass that is full of ideas and faults and growth and discontent. To be humane is to return to love, in all its complexities, over and over again. To be one part of the whole of humanity is to play with our toes in holy dust even as we reach with our spirits toward holy fulfillment.

**King's use of "man," meaning all humanity, is kept in this quotation.*

Quotations drawn from The Measure of a Man, Martin Luther King, Jr. (Christian Education Press, 1959)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Rachel Hackenberg is the Publisher for The Pilgrim Press and Faith-Forming Publications for the United Church of Christ.

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