

Honour and the 21st Century: What Does *Honour Before Honours* Mean to Me?

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Honour is a funny word; one that, due to its porosity and complex etymological roots, can be taken to mean almost anything, from referring to dignity and reputation to respect or even the Kantian principle of doing the right thing, no matter the consequences. Like a grammatical salamander, it slips from verb to noun form, changing subtly in meaning each time. Because of this, it's important that any user of the word is certain of their interpretation, lest it become an impotent catch-phrase; thus how each of us interprets the idea of *Honour Before Honours* is personal and powerful. To me, honour is three things: unlike *honours*, it is a quiet thing. It is a value rather than a product; it exists on its own as an answer rather than a question. Finally, it is generous; honour gives more than it takes. To place honour above honours is to fulfil the words of Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."¹

In a society that values competition—especially the winning of competitions—honour is a quiet thing amid the loudness of victory. Whether for accolade in sports, music, academics or standards like beauty, weight or a myriad other markers of 'success', competition drives our personal and professional lives. The by-product of success is accolade and our desire for this accolade is what fuels our desire to compete, to 'win' in whatever races we choose to run. Thus, by virtue of its nature, accolade is loud, for without recognition and, hopefully, admiration, competition and accolade lose their allure. In comparison, the products of honour are often quiet; a promise, for example, is only of note if it *isn't* honoured. Rejecting a job or award on principle will rarely lead to congratulations, and the decision to make an honourable choice is most often made in the quiet place that exists between oneself and one's sense of a greater moral framework (whether secular or as part of a personal conception of religion). In this way, my understanding of *honour* is closely related to humility, defined as the antonym of "arrogance, boastfulness and vanity."² John Steinbeck, in his 'Travels With Charley: In Search of America' notes that "we value virtue but do not discuss it"³, neatly summarising both the challenge and beauty of honour. Although we move faster toward a hyper-competitive future, our society continues to place worth on honour, yet often fails to acknowledge it. Honour is most notable when lacking, and as a result, to live a life where honour takes precedence over honours means accepting and revelling in the quiet voice at the end of the day that whispers *I have done good*, whether recognised or not.

Honour cannot be bought or sold; it is a philosophical underpinning that answers questions. If we were to strive only for what the world tells us is valuable—income, accolade and cold practicality—certain actions might seem pointless, as with the example of denying an accolade on principle. Yet William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar tells us that he loves honour more than he fears death⁴. Whether it brings accolade or persecution, friends or enemies, honour is fundamentally related to the concept of Goodness and is one of the forces that makes humans something more than upright chimpanzees. While it is important to question what honour is and what it looks like in our lives, it is a concept impossible to extract from a contemporary Western conception of morality. Honours are not a value, they are something to be received; they are a product, whether tactile or related more to recognition. To borrow from modern psychology's Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

¹ NIV, 2019

² Lietch, 2019

³ Steinbeck, 1962

⁴ Shakespeare, c.1599

framework, aiming to live a life driven by values means identifying the ways of being that are personally significant and thus “[engage] in behaviors [sic.] or [feel] difficult emotions in order to achieve a meaningful, fulfilled life.”⁵ To live a life of meaning and goodness requires the identification and pursuit of values and a value-driven life. While it is possible to place precedence on the attainment of recognition, it is impossible to live according to a ‘Code of Honours’.

Ultimately, though, the distinguishing characteristic of honour is its generosity. Where honours take, honour gives. Former United States President Abraham Lincoln claimed “I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have.”⁶ To be honourable is to *give*; give when receiving nothing in return, give to fulfil the need in the world, give to express love, give what one can, for we are each afforded light and truth and it is our duty and privilege to share these with the world in whatever way we can. The motto of my primary school, Marburg State School, was “Service Before Self”, which bears a striking similarity to “Honour Before Honours”, emphasising the importance of giving back before receiving anything. But an honourable life is not one of gratuitous, performative martyrdom, nor of neglecting oneself in relentless altruism. The generosity of honour means recognising one’s own limitations and capacities, for by knowing and caring for ourselves, we can better relate and give to others—and fulfil Christ’s command to live life to its fullest extent. Nobody is completely honourable. Nobody *can* be completely honourable. But in prioritising this concept, we become custodians of a kind; a community whose generous love might remedy an often frightening world.

Honour is personal; quiet, fundamental and generous. It is an old-fashioned word—but it is not an old-fashioned concept. As we move into a new, ever-changing chapter of human history, it is living out vibrant ideas like honour, and placing them before the pursuit of more superficial honours that will steer us toward a future we can be proud of.

⁵ Hall, 2014

⁶ Lincoln, n.d.