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THE WORK OF ONE MAN CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By DR. DEREK C. BOK
President
Harvard University

Text of speech by Dr. Derek C. Bok, President of Harvard University, and grandson of Edward Bok, builder of Lake Wales’ Singing Tower. It was delivered Feb. 1, 1979, on occasion of...
the 50th anniversary of the dedication of the tower.

It is a great honor for me to speak to you today on behalf of Edward Bok, the man responsible for this tower and the sanctuary that surrounds it. Of all the gifts he made, the sanctuary is the one that mattered most to him.

How he would have loved to be here today—and how pleased he would have been to learn that millions of people have come to the sanctuary over the past half century to look and listen and perhaps to find themselves again. How delighted he would have been to discover that after a half century filled with depression, war, and unprecedented courage, the bells still play magnificently and the gardens are, if anything, even more beautiful than they were when he looked upon them for the last time.

As most of you know, the idea of this sanctuary did not originate in the mind of Edward Bok, nor even in the United States, but on a tiny island in the North Sea—a place so barren and desolate that even the birds could not find shelter from the winds. To that island came a young man to serve as mayor. And every year for fifty years he planted trees and shrubs and plants until the barren island was transformed into a sanctuary for the birds and a place of beauty for artists and visitors of every kind.

Grandmother’s Admonition

His wife bore thirteen children on that island and to all of them she said: "As you go out into the world, I want each of you to take with you the spirit of your father's work, and each in your own way and place do as he has done and make you the world a bit more beautiful and better because you have been in it."

The woman who spoke those words, of course, was Edward Bok’s grandmother, and this sanctuary is his attempt to re-create on this high ground what his grandfather accomplished on that island in the North Sea.
But what manner of man was Edward Bok? What meaning can we take from his life and the sanctuary he left us? Looking back, Edward Bok seems a little quaint, a bit antique, rather out of fashion. We cannot imagine his autobiography winning the Pulitzer Prize today as it did in 1921. But during his lifetime, he captured the attention of the American public, not only as a writer and publisher but also as the embodiment of Horatio Alger. The Horatio Alger story that helped make up the American dream was perfectly realized in Edward Bok.

**Arrived Penniless**

He arrived in this country at age six, without any money. He left school at age thirteen to support his parents and worked as window washer, baker’s helper, messenger, reporter, and eventually as the editor of the leading women’s magazine. Although he married the boss’s daughter, no one ever doubted that he achieved success by his own merits. Nor could his achievements be described as a cheap commercial success, for he used his editorship to fight continually for a higher quality of life—pressing for better sanitation, conservation, honest advertising, better architecture.

Though his magazine depended on pleasing women, he did not shrink from speaking out on uncomfortable subjects and unpopular causes. He wrote on venereal disease—when that was not a subject to be raised in polite society. He attacked women’s clubs for being trivial. He even opposed women’s suffrage, and opposing the right of women to vote was not an easy thing to do for the editor of a women’s magazine.

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**BELLs ARRIVE IN LAKE WALES**

Fifty one years ago, Sept. 11, 1928, five flat cars of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad rolled into Lake Wales carrying a strange cargo: 123,000 pounds of bells that were almost as carefully guarded as a Presidential Special. They were assembled as the largest carillon in the world at The Singing Tower.

-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
His editorials provoked much controversy and provoked many petitions for his resignation, but circulation continued to grow and grow, and eventually he amassed a fortune. At age fifty-six, however, he retired in order to devote himself to serving others—and it was in this period that he conceived and built the tower and the sanctuary.

"Life is Simple"

Throughout his life, Edward Bok preached a few basic maxims. They were anything but complicated, because as he often said: "Life is simple; it is only people who make it seem difficult." His precepts were few:

- Work hard to fulfill your talents, to provide for your family, and, above all, to be of service to others.

- Be scrupulous in honesty and integrity, for your good character is the most important legacy you leave behind.
Love America for allowing you, and many others, the opportunity to progress and succeed according to your merits.

- Be an idealist; be slow to criticize and quick to see the good in others.

Above all, recognize the power that lives’ in you, the individual. As he once wrote: "It was only one snowflake that began the storm; it was but one grain of sand that started the cyclone. It is you who are potent; you who are mighty-not others; not everyone else-but you."

From the vantage point of 1979, this philosophy seems definitely quaint and out of date. The maxims are too simple, idealistic to the point of seeming banal. Success is not simply a matter of hard work and clean living. The migrant worker, the abandoned wife on welfare, the jobless adolescent in the ghetto-none of these has an equal opportunity to rise to fame and fortune. If honesty and integrity are so important, why are so many people in high places so careless with the truth? And how can one be so idealistic in a world of atomic bombs, of Watergate, of Viet Nam, of violent crime, and widespread unemployment?

If Bok Were Alive

In truth, life is not simple—it is a big bloomin' buzzin' confusion with huge problems and billions of people crowded together on a planet where none of us can be sure of our ability to know how to resolve our problems, let alone make much of a difference.

Despite these doubts and complications, I suspect that Edward Bok would still stick to his convictions if he were alive today to express them. He would put them differently, of course, for no one ever had a shrewder grasp of his audience. But he would not have been surprised or shaken by the arguments of the realists and the pessimists.

He knew that hard work didn't always bring national success; he saw failure and disappointment all around him. He knew that there was evil in the world for he campaigned continually against it. He understood that America wasn't perfect, for he often wrote of its shortcomings -its slums, its waste, its preoccupation with material things.

But he was not an academic scholar building complex theories to account for each detail. He was a publicist. He believed in moving people—lots of people—and so he preached the simple message that he felt the country and its people needed in order to keep moving forward so that we could eventually solve our problems.

Unshakable Conviction

And so, despite the hardships of the world—the suffering, the injustice, the corruption—despite Watergate and Viet Nam, he would have clung to his idealism because he knew that without faith, without optimism, without a belief in the good of others, without a love of country, there could be no trust, no willingness to sacrifice for others, no hope for the future, no respect for authority—and ultimately no possibility of social betterment and reform. Above all, he would have clung to his faith in the individual and in the ability of each human being to make a positive contribution, for he knew that once we lose faith in our power, as individuals, to make a difference, all hope of progress will inevitably come to a halt. In the end, it is this faith in human beings, this unshakable conviction in the responsibility that each of us bears toward our fellow man, that gives the real meaning to our celebration.
This tower, this sanctuary, this beauty that millions have enjoyed over the years are not only important in themselves. They are Edward Bok’s way of saying that the work of one man can make a difference to enhance the lives of others. And so, if there is any message we can take from this celebration, it is the message that ultimately gave birth to the sanctuary: "Make you the world a bit more beautiful and better because you have been in it." If each of us can succeed in ways great and small to honor that maxim, the world cannot fail to be better for it.