

Gospel 2

6-6-92

This is my "ethical will." This is a statement in which I try to spell out the values that I think it is most important for me to pass on. The framework of my ethical will is adapted from an essay published in 1889 by Andrew Carnegie entitled "The Gospel of Wealth."

In my ethical will I summarize my hopes for my children and grandchildren in these words: I want them to live, as I have been able to live, in a free, open, and democratic society. If the society is free, open, and democratic, then the chances are best that the other values I care about -- political, economic, even religious values -- will also be within the next generations' reach.

To say that I want my children to be able to live as I have lived in a "free, open, and democratic society" does not mean that I believe the United States to be a perfect society. The most immediate qualification I must add is that many other citizens of this society have not found the same freedom, the same openness, the same opportunity to participate. The most fundamental lessons of the century are of that kind: that prejudice in all its forms is pervasive even in a society as relatively free as this one. At the moment, racial and ethnic conflict are more menacing than the nuclear terrors of a decade or two ago.

I seem to be saying that for all its faults, American democracy is the best political system available to us. That is what I would say, and that "democratic capitalism," or whatever it might be called, is still the best available economic system, despite its evils and injustices.

"Two cheers for democracy," as someone said. "Two cheers for capitalism." Two cheers, as well, for the "third sector" of voluntary action -- charity, philanthropy, voluntary giving and voluntary service -- that plays such a critical role in making American democracy possible. A three-sector society of government, marketplace, and voluntary action, flawed as it is because of the inherent weaknesses and recurrent failures of each of the three sectors, is still the best possibility I know of for the survival of free, open, and democratic societies in which my children and grandchildren might live.

A hundred years ago Carnegie was concerned to argue against socialism and communism as the principal threats to democratic capitalism. The intervening decades proved him to be right in his concern. Neither freedom nor justice were well served by the triumph of the followers of Karl Marx. Carnegie's philosophy was that on the average people are better off in a free market system governed democratically. At one extreme there are people of great wealth; at the other extreme there are people in terrible poverty.

The greatest success of the system during the 20th century has been the growth of the middle class; its most disturbing current failure is the shrinking of that same middle class. Public policy seems to have encouraged the prosperity of the rich and undermined the fragile well-being of the poor. The economic system is not working as well as it must if

democratic capitalism is to survive. Ideologues rather than pragmatists have been in control again. The welfare ideology of the Great Society which vastly overstated the ability of government to achieve economic prosperity and economic justice at the same time, has been succeeded by a welfare ideology that seems to say that government has no welfare role to play at all. Mr. Carnegie would not have been so naive.

My ethical will asserts four basic values: self-help, mutual aid, government assistance, and philanthropy. There is a place for each. overemphasis on "rights" has diminished the importance of all but government assistance, to the detriment of everyone -- especially the poor and oppressed. Any political platform that neglects the importance of all four values is either naive or dishonest.

Beneath the four values of self-help, mutual aid, government assistance, and philanthropy is an underlying philosophy of human nature: people are capable of both virtue and vice. The eternal argument between "liberals" and "conservatives" hinges on their overemphasis on one or the other. The historic lesson of totalitarianism or authoritarianism of both Left and Right is that simplistic ideologies of altruism and egoism lead to tyranny. The genius of constitutional democracy is its effort to turn both virtue and vice toward the common good. "Virtue" in the hands of a true believer is a dangerous weapon; it is the basis for Thoreau's warning: "If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life...." On the other hand, the whole history of humanity condemns the miser, and those who celebrate greed as the highest virtue deny themselves the possibility of love.