

The New Aristocracy

A profile of extraordinary human beings

by Marjorie Kelly

"Into the heart that's high, pure, and open like a gate, the god of true mercy would enter differently. He'd come gripped with power as gods are, and as radiant."

—RAINER MARIA RILKE,
The Sonnets to Orpheus,
Second Series,
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I've been thinking about astonishing people—and I don't mean impressive people, really, or gorgeous people, though the ones I'm thinking of usually are impressive and gorgeous, but not in the way *Esquire* magazine would have it. I'm thinking about individuals who are wholly themselves, who aren't buffeted by other people's opinions of them, and who live by their own set of rules. For these, work is play, and it's usually the kind of work that makes a difference in the world. They're a little conceited, often, because they have some idea of how wonderful they are. They're a people I refer to as the New Aristocracy.

The old aristocracy was animated by a will to power, and marked by opulence. The New Aristocracy doesn't so much contradict this as build upon it, and humanize it: possessing power in the world, but using it to empower others; enjoying elegance, but infusing it with a welcoming comfort that puts others at ease. While the old aristocracy was limited to a few, the new aristocracy is open to anyone, and entrance is gained not by birth but by character. And while the old aristocracy had an impulse to exploit, the New Aristocracy has an impulse to care. It is an aristocracy of the heart.

I'm thinking of people like John and Nancy Jack Todd, who founded an institute to bring appropriate technology to the Third World; or Eugene Lang, a New York industrialist who is financing college scholarships for a sixth-grade class in Harlem; or John Seed, who is single-handedly leading the fight to save the world's rain forests; or Nancy Abraham, a Shearson Lehman executive who converted a five-story building into housing for the homeless (*read more about Abraham's project on page 13*).

But these are only the most heroic examples. In our daily lives we often en-

counter the kind of people I'm talking about—individuals with a certain grace in the world, who have a quiet impact on people around them, and who live with an unpretentious dignity. We might find them as middle managers in a large corporation, giving sensitive direction and support to their staff. We might find them at home, raising healthy children. Or we might find them at play, like the former photographer I met, who summers on a sailboat in upper Wisconsin, and winters on a sailboat in the Virgin Islands—a man who exudes an air of extraordinary calm and contentment that is an inspiration to those around him.

The distinguished psychologist Carl Rogers called this kind of person "self-empowered," or one who has become "that self which one truly is," in Søren Kierkegaard's phrase. In his book *On Becoming a Person*, Rogers described the hesitant and fearful process one goes through in moving away from all that one is *not*—moving away from what one ought to be, away from pressures to conform and please others. It is a process of accepting all that one is, including the impulses that are contradictory and the urges that seem ugly. Such people, Rogers wrote, "are not disturbed to find that they are not the same from day to day, that they do not always hold the same feelings toward a given experience or person, that they are not always consistent. They are in flux, and seem more content to continue in this flowing current."

Psychologist Abraham Maslow described these individuals as "self-actualized," or as embodying "full humanness." He developed a psychology of extraordinary humanness, which he described in his book *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. Fully human individuals are less susceptible to fads than most, and they do not like to be controlled, Maslow wrote. "They prefer to feel free

and to be free." They are good at listening to their "inner signals" or "impulse voices"—and they have an uncanny clarity about right and wrong. In one group of such people Maslow observed:

They tended to agree about what was right and wrong, as if they were perceiving something real and extrahuman rather than comparing tastes that might be relative to the individual person.

Maslow found these to be dedicated people, devoted to some task or calling—doing work that seems made for them, that feels more like a self-indulgence than a duty. Having satisfied their basic needs—for safety, belongingness, self-respect, and affection—self-actualized people develop *meta-needs* for those things that are higher, more noble, or transcendent. They begin to work for justice, or art, or truth, and their highest obligations become their highest pleasures. People whose meta-needs are unmet experience what Maslow calls "metapathologies": alienation, loss of zest, death wishes, futility, cynicism.

The profile of a fully human individual is indeed attractive, yet it is not without its shadow. Carl Jung, one of the founders of modern psychiatry, emphasized that human nature has an inescapable dark side, writing in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*:

What is inferior or even worthless belongs to me as my shadow and gives me substance and mass. How can I be substantial if I fail to cast a shadow? I must have a dark side if I am to be whole; and inasmuch as I become conscious of my shadow I also remember that I am a human being like any other.

Thus, all radiant things must cast a shadow; but beyond that there is yet a different kind of darkness that can take human form. It is a darkness that is deeper, more pervasive—one that marks a separate class of human beings, on the surface very much like the New Aristocracy. This is the class of the dark angels, the individuals with enormous personal power and magnetism, but who have about them an ineffable something, hidden and tragic. My father was such a man, and I have known others—have been drawn to them magnetically. Often it takes me years to see their true character, because I so much want to believe in their nobility. But because it is a nobility that lacks a *largeness of heart*, it is in the end but a blustering egotism.

The signature of such individuals is



Pablo Picasso, *Woman in an Armchair No. 1*. Lithograph, 27³/₁₆ x 20¹/₈".

their *unsubmitted will*. Since they consider themselves in some way outside the human family—superior to it and beneath it, simultaneously—they use their considerable power not for the greater good but for their own aggrandizement. They are human bulldozers.

I have called these people a separate class, but their traits show up in many of us—certainly in myself. Their mode is one I operate in at times, characterized by a hyper-criticalness. Its opposite is a *capacity for reverence*, as Friedrich Nietzsche remarked in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche observed that "the vulgarity of many a nature spurts up suddenly like dirty water" when something "bearing the marks of great destiny" passes before it; but the refined soul experiences "an involuntary silence, a hesitation of the eye, a cessation of all gestures" in the presence of that which merits respect.

If some of us have within us a bit of the dark angel, all of us have in us nobility; it is our task to diminish the one and nourish the other. We would do well to remember that it is not mere elegance or power that characterizes true nobility, but a capacity to reverence something beyond oneself. It is this that is the mark of the extraordinary human being. ☞

Having satisfied their basic needs, self-actualized people begin to work for justice, or art, or truth. People starved in these meta-needs experience death wishes, joylessness, futility, or cynicism.