

The Hollow Men

Third Place, ToastMasters Semi-Final Contest (Regional): Toastmasters contests can address any topic and must be delivered between 4:30 And 7:30 Minutes. Word length is typically 600-800 words. My first contest year and here I was at the World Championship Semifinals. My topic was one I cared about.

A speech by Brian Woolf (June 1, 1978)

We are the Hollow Men

We are the Stuffed Men

Headpieces filled with straw, Alas.

Mr. Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters, and most welcome guests, these lines from T. S. Eliot's "Hollow Man" reflects one of modern man's greatest tragedies: the misuse and abuse of our most vital faculty - our minds.

We have permitted our minds to be slowly anaesthetized by the mesmerizing power of television; to be quietly corroded by the toxic fumes of prejudice and intolerance; our minds have become stagnant pools of the conventional wisdom, choked by the weeds of trivia and starved of the life-giving river of fresh, vibrant thought and mental challenge.

It is paradoxical that we enjoy one of the greatest civilizations in history, yet so many of us are content to live as mental pygmies. College entrance scores are falling; libraries are under-utilized; magazines, low in mental nutritional value, are widely digested. Our everyday discussions are often no more than a replaying of a litany of "canned" conversation pieces.

This misuse and abuse of our minds, ladies and gentlemen, takes away from us our real freedom. We have no freedom when our minds are shackled to popular opinion, when our thoughts are manacled to mediocrity, or when our mental sluggishness cannot cope with the change all about us.

No. True freedom comes when we can stand back from the passionate certainties of the crowd and coolly make our own independent assessments and decisions. True freedom comes when our minds are supple and well exercised and not stuffed with the straw of misuse. True freedom comes when we are drawing from the universal reservoir of wisdom and understanding when making our decisions and judgments.

My friends, by devoting just a small part of each day to challenging and stimulating reading, we can begin to draw from this sea of wisdom. By wrestling with new ideas, by grappling with interesting issues, we can begin an odyssey of understanding, we can begin to fill our emptiness.

As we read more and more, we will discover our circle of acquaintances expanding. We will begin to invite to our homes, for an evening or maybe a week, some of the greatest minds of all time. We may learn logic from Aristotle, liberty from Voltaire, or life from Thoreau. And out of our mental swampland will rise a city of the mind populated with the greatest people who have walked this earth: the saints and the scientists, the heretics and the humorists, the poets and the philosophers. And in this ever-growing city we will erect buildings of thought and pyramids of concepts.

It was once written, *We are part of all we meet*. As we read, reflect, think and have our minds challenged by our new-found friends, we will discover fresh attitudes, fascinating ideas and fantastic people - and they will all become part of us; they will be absorbed into the blotting paper of our subconscious, into the cloth of our cosmos.

Certain authors, certain writings, when discovered will stand out like diamonds among rubies. They will have a special attraction, a special meaning to us, and we will repeatedly go back and back to them, like bees to a fragrant flower.

And, one day, ladies and gentlemen, after we have absorbed some of the vast wisdom and understanding which is ever-present in our universe we will begin to experience true freedom. Our mental blindfold will be ripped away. We will find that we have escaped from our shallow thinking, from our hollow prisons of ignorance. Our minds will be a river of fresh vibrant thought.

Then, a latter-day poet may write of us:

We are the Thinking Men

We are the Free Men

Headpieces filled with understanding, Hallelujah!

631 words

Brian Woolf's comments: I cared about this topic. I thought it was a good speech and wondered why I didn't win. So, I asked a wise old Toastmaster friend. His answer: You didn't sweat under the armpits. In other words, don't just sell it intellectually - deliver it with gusto - let the audience see and feel how you care.

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About the author...

Besides a full business life in retailing, and later, loyalty marketing, the other part of Brian Woolf's life has been filled with diverse interests: particularly speaking (including Toastmasters), travel (including all seven continents), and reading (including history). And he has written seven books sharing what he has learned along the journey. Ask him, two favorite trips? Antarctica and the Nile. Ask him, two favorite books? *The Lessons of History* (Will & Ariel Durant) and *Over the Edge of the World* (Laurence Bergreen).
He loves learning and sharing.

And there's more where this came from...

**Visit Brian Woolf on the web for his complete collection of
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