

## ALBERT SCHWEITZER – HIS LIFE, HIS LEGACY

### Bob Weekley

*Walk the Walk* or *Talk the Talk*. With Albert Schweitzer it was *Walk the Walk*. When he had reached the peak of renown as a clergyman, theologian, professor, and scholar, he decided it was time for him to quit *talking* and start *doing*. He had had enough of *talking the talk* and was determined to silently start *walking the walk*. The words he used in an interview with Norman Cousins: “I decided that I would make my life my argument. I would advocate the things I believed, in terms of the life I lived and what I did.”

In explaining why he steadfastly resisted the arguments of those who tried to talk him out of walking away from his prestigious positions in academia and the clergy he said that he wanted to work with his hands. “I wanted to be a doctor,” he said, “that I might work without having to talk. For years I have been giving myself out in words, and it was with joy that I had followed the calling of a theological teacher and preacher. But this new form of activity would not be merely talking about the religion of love but actually putting it into practice.” *Walking the walk*.

If we could assimilate this point into our own lives – just this one thought could change our lives. But there is so much more to Albert Schweitzer – my problem in preparing this talk was not deciding what to say but what to leave out.

I must admit, Schweitzer challenges me almost to the point of despair. I am not the only one – and this is a fairly common reaction to Schweitzer’s genius. One of his early interviewers and biographers, Stefan Zweig, wrote that Schweitzer’s personality is “too impressive.” “His humanity is overwhelming.” Albert Einstein said of his friend: “I have scarcely ever known personally a single individual in whom goodness and the need for beauty are merged to such a degree of unity as in the case of Albert Schweitzer.” A poll of scholars placed Schweitzer as one of the three greatest geniuses of western civilization, the others being Leonard Da Vinci and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

### His Life

Let us just review tersely the many amazing milestones of his life.

He was born January 14, 1875 to a frugal, educated, respected family in Alsace and spent most of his boyhood in the town of Gunsbach. His father was a Lutheran minister.

By age 9 he was being asked to substitute for the church organist.

At 10 he went to live with an uncle, an elementary principal, for 8 years to get a better education.

At age 16 he took the organist’s position formerly held by the famous Eugene Munch. (Eugene Munch was the father of Charles Munch of Boston Symphony fame.)

At 18 he studied organ with Charles-Marie Widor in Paris.

Age 20 marks a turning point. At that young age he resolved privately to devote his life to the direct service of humanity as soon as he reached the age of 30. He gave himself 10 years to accomplish what he could in his chosen fields of music,

philosophy, and theology. Later in this decade he decided privately that this direct service would be as a medical doctor in Africa.

At 23 he published his first book – a tribute to Eugene Munch. At this time he studied in Paris at the Sorbonne and with Widor again.

At 24 he was studying philosophy and organ in Berlin. By this time he had become an acclaimed concert virtuoso. That same year he also received his doctorate in philosophy at Strasburg University. Schweitzer's book on Immanuel Kant was published that year as well.

The next year, at age 25, he received his degree in theology and was ordained as a minister at St. Nicholai. In addition to his ministerial duties he was appointed professor at the St. Thomas theological seminary in Strasbourg. And, that same year, he published another theological scholarly book, this one on The Last Supper.

At age 28 he was appointed the Dean of the St. Thomas seminary where he was a professor – a great honor for such a young man. That same year also he became the organist of the elite Paris Bach Society.

At age 30, true to the private decision he had made at age 20, on his birthday he informed his close friends of his earlier decision to become a doctor in Africa. Within the year, with sadness but resolution, he resigned his positions at the seminary, resigned his church, and – although he had doctorates in philosophy and theology – began basic science studies for medical school as an undergraduate. By this time he had become famous as an acclaimed musician, a leading scholar and writer, a great theologian and well-known philosopher. And, incidentally that same year, he published a biography of Johann Sebastian Bach.

At 31, while a full-time medical student, by giving up a great deal of sleep he published what has become known as a masterpiece in theological scholarship: *The Quest of Historical Jesus*. This book still is a critical landmark in the study of the Christian religion. Somehow that year he managed also to publish books he had been nurturing on organ building and on organ playing.

At age 36 he passed the state medical examinations. And, he published another book on theology that year, this one on the Apostle Paul.

The next year, at 37 he published the first of six volumes he was to publish on the works of Bach. This project had taken six years and has been acclaimed as a new interpretation of Bach's music and of art in general. And, finally at age 37 he took the time to get married. His bride was Helene Bresslau, a Jew in Semite-conscious Germany and France, who was a wonderful match for his sense of mission. She began to train as a nurse so she could be of assistance to him in Africa.

At 38 combining his theological genius with his medical studies he published his doctoral thesis: a psychiatric study of Jesus – was Jesus afflicted with a mental abnormality? Schweitzer received his doctorate in medicine that year, completed his medical internship and applied to the Paris Missionary Society to go to Africa as a mission doctor. He was rejected due to concern about his renown as a free-thinker. Board members recognized his dedication and his genius, and they desperately needed a doctor, but they were afraid that his theological learning would confuse the other missionaries and the Africans. Finally, he was accepted on the terms that, first he would provide his own financial support and, secondly, that he not preach or discuss theology in Africa. Schweitzer agreed and

promised to remain “as mute as a fish.” He and Helene worked day and night to raise funds for their new venture, then buying great quantities of medicines and supplies for shipment, and finally, that same eventful year, departing joyously for the Gabon, a French colony on the equator in West Africa. He took with him a gift from the Paris Bach Society, a specially made zinc-lined piano for the tropical climate. It was fitted with pedals so he could simulate in practice the organ.

At 39, in his second year in Africa, having established his clinic and beginning his busy practice there, he, as a German and thus an enemy alien, and Helene were interned and held as prisoners of war by the French and forbidden to see their patients.

At age 43 after four years as a prisoner of war he was returned to Alsace as part of a prisoner exchange. His health and his spirit had declined from exhaustion and depression. That year his beloved mother was killed as she was trampled by German cavalry in her village. While he was recovering his health and his spirit he accepted again the pastorate at St. Nicholai in Strasbourg and he also became a hospital physician there. Over the next four years he recovered by plunging headlong into the concerns that had led to his depression – what was wrong with western civilization? In addition to his pastoral and physicians’ duties he began to give lectures and concerts in many European countries and – by the reception he received – began to believe that he could rebuild his work in Africa.

At age 48, concluding this interlude of recovery in Europe he published his two-volume *Philosophy of Civilization* and began preparations to return to Africa.

At age 49 he returned to Africa, rebuilt his hospital – this time as an independent operation located apart from any of the missions. Over the next two decades he continued to build the staff and infrastructure of his hospital while returning to Europe every two or three years to give concerts, lectures, and to raise funds for his African hospital.

At age 55 he published his second book on the Apostle Paul.

At age 56 he published *Out of My Life and Thought*, an autobiographical work. He had grumbled at this task – his publisher had threatened that others would be writing his biography and that he must do so if he wanted an accurate record. But Schweitzer argued that he was still growing and who could know what turns his life and philosophy would take. He yielded to his publisher and to Helene and wrote this book in a month, not bothering to be concerned much with its literary quality. (It starts: “I was born on January 14, 1875, at Kayersberg...the second child of Louis Schweitzer...”) Published in 1933, it is still in print and has been translated into many languages and read by millions around the world.

At age 60, he published another book, this on Indian religion and philosophy, indicative of the breadth of his research and the high regard he had developed for the eastern religions.

At age 64 (in 1939) he returned to Europe from Africa and found that war was imminent. He returned to his mission on the next boat in case he would be prevented from doing so once hostilities began. Once the war began raging in Europe all funds and supplies for his hospital were cut off. His funding during this period was sustained solely by Schweitzer foundations and societies in the United States. Foremost among these was the Unitarian Service Committee. In 1946 a gift of funds from the Unitarians arrived just in time to save the hospital

from closing due to bankruptcy and he always praised the Unitarians for their help and concern. He said the Unitarians had saved his hospital.

At age 74 (1949) he made his only visit to the United States to accept an invitation to speak in Aspen, Colorado at the Goethe Bicentennial Assembly. He was accompanied to Aspen, Colorado by Dr. Joy of the Unitarian Service Committee.

At age 77, three LP albums of Schweitzer playing Bach were released by RCA.

At age 78, after he had begun to speak out on his concerns about the spread of atomic weapons, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his anti-nuclear and humanitarian leadership.

At age 82 he returned to Africa for the 13<sup>th</sup> time carrying the ashes of his wife Helene with him. He was determined to work there until the end of his life. From Africa he recorded radio broadcasts, appeals for peace broadcast from Oslo.

At age 83 his radio appeals were published as the volume *Peace or Atomic War?*

At age 86 he became a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship.

At 90, still a doctor in Gabon, he died at his clinic.

### Influences, Motivation, and Attributes

What can we say about the making of such a human being? Was he cut from different cloth than the rest of us? What motivated and influenced him? What attributes made him tick?

It is clear from studying his life that he never sought to be famous, or to be a celebrity. It is clear that his desire was to give of his energy and talent to those who were less fortunate than himself. To help people, one at a time, was his greatest need. Only late in his life was he convinced to capitalize on his fame and to try to use his great influence in the cause of peace and disarmament. I will list the attributes and influences that seemed most relevant to me.

1. Schweitzer had a life long concern for all living creatures. As a boy he was convinced once to go out with a friend to shoot birds. Just as they were about to shoot, the church bells rang. Young Albert took this as a divine message – remembering God’s commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” and rushed out to frighten the birds away before they were killed. He later wrote:

From that day onward I took courage to emancipate myself from the fear of others, and whenever my inner convictions were at stake I let other people’s opinions weigh less with me than they had done previously. I tried to unlearn my former dread of being laughed at by my schoolfellows. This early influence upon me of the commandment not to kill or to torture other creatures is the great experience of my childhood and youth. By the side of that all others are insignificant. (Marshall and Polling, p. 5)

When young Albert was taught his bedtime prayers he was concerned that the prayers were all said for people, and for one’s own interests. Thinking of the creatures who had no one to pray for them, after his mother left the room he would add a prayer of his own: “Bless and protect all things that have breath, guard them from evil,

and let them sleep in peace.” Many years later, as a theology student, he could not accept the idea that man’s ethics begin and end with man. He had already begun to perceive that we are part of the “interdependent web of all existence,” as stated in our Unitarian Universalist covenant. Schweitzer’s concern for all living creatures became the foundation for the philosophical and ethical concept for which he is famous: *reverence for life*.

2. Albert Schweitzer developed a great respect for reason and truth. He had begun as a boy, son of a minister, to think independently and to question the Bible’s literal truth. Could God really condemn all of the animals except for two of each species because men had misbehaved? Would a loving God destroy all the people of the earth except one family? When he asked his teacher these questions he was told that faith takes precedent over reason. But young Albert reasoned that Reason must come from God. Needless to say he almost failed his confirmation classes due to his questioning spirit.

3. Another important attribute was that he became gradually free of religious prejudice. The churches in his town in Alsace, by law, were used both by Catholics and Protestants and he decided early that neither was wrong. He married a Jew. Due to his honest scholarship he shattered cherished but untrue illusions about the life of Jesus and the teachings of the Christian Church. He embraced the wisdom he found in the eastern religions.

4. Another attribute he developed early was a passionate love for music and art. This love brought him pleasure and peace throughout his life. Perhaps his appreciation for beauty helped him to deal successfully with the rigor of his life.

5. The need to be thorough was a lifelong attribute. Everything he did was with great thoroughness and care. For example, he not only loved to play beautiful music on the organ and became one its foremost virtuosos, he became an expert on the organs themselves. He wrote two books on organs and organ building and made the building and preservation of great organs a cause. He would go someplace new to play a concert, arriving early, and at concert time they would look for him and find him in shirtsleeves working to perfect the inner works of the organ. And, not only did he become an expert on playing organs, and on the building of organs, he became one of the world’s foremost experts on the most famous composer of organ music, Johann Sebastian Bach. Schweitzer’s books on Bach’s life and his volumes on Bach’s compositions are still standards in the music world.

As a theologian, he became renowned for the depth of his research. As a doctor he was acclaimed and his insights into tropical medicine made important contributions to the medical world.

He was fully aware of this near compulsion for thoroughness and at times he regretted the extra effort he felt compelled to expend to understand and perfect all that he did. Regarding the writing of his books analyzing the life of St. Paul, his work on the Last Supper, and his studies of the life of Jesus, he wrote:

Instead of contenting myself with simply expounding the solution I had discovered, I took upon my shoulders each time the further work of writing the history of the problem. That I three times brought myself to follow such a laborious byroad is the fault of Aristotle. How often have I cursed the hour in which I first read the section of his *Metaphysics* in which he develops the problem of philosophy out of a criticism of previous philosophizing! Something which slumbered within me then awoke. Again and again since then have I experienced within me the urge to try to grasp the nature of a problem not only as it is itself but also by the way in which it unfolds itself in the course of history. (*Out of my Life...*, p.96)

6. Another attribute I must list is Schweitzer's amazing capacity for work. This capacity was driven of the immense interest he took in whatever he was doing. Charles Munch, great conductor of the Boston Symphony, as a boy had known Schweitzer when Schweitzer studied and worked with his father. Munch wrote: "Schweitzer's capacity for work is incredible. I have often seen him, after a full and strenuous day of activity, sit down with students and take the time to correct their work and to guide them through new problems." When Schweitzer wrote his book on the life of Bach, he first wrote the six-hundred page work in French then wrote an even longer version in German.

When Schweitzer was finishing medical school, writing his thesis, and doing his medical internship, he matter-of-factly says that he also "found time, by serious encroachment on my night's rest, to bring to completion a work on the history of scientific research into the thought world of St. Paul, to revise and enlarge the *Quest of the Historical Jesus* for the second edition, and together with Widor, to prepare an edition of Bach's preludes and fugues for the organ, giving with each piece directions for its rendering." In Africa Schweitzer was not only the hospital doctor but also the pharmacist, the carpenter, and the mason. His medical cases and surgeries extended from early morning until night. Yet he wrote that one evening "the idea came suddenly upon me that I might after all use my free hours in Africa for the purpose of perfecting and deepening my [keyboard] technique. I immediately formed a plan to take, one after another, compositions by Bach, Mendelssohn, Widor, Cesar Franck, and Max Reger, study them carefully down to the smallest detail, and learn them by heart, even if I had to spend weeks or months on any particular piece."

7. As the last attribute I will note – but there are many more – I will mention his ability, through both fame and struggle, to maintain his human side. All who knew him spoke of his generosity, simplicity, humility, and good humor. He loved people and always took time for them. He forgave them when their capacity was not as great as his. Although he was a large, ruggedly handsome man, he had no vanity about clothing. Many wonderful anecdotes are told about his humanity. For example, one evening during a visit in Europe he was to attend and speak at a reception in his honor. When he arrived at the chateau he was apparently looking shabby and was haughtily told by a servant to enter by the servants' door. He did so and was visiting in the kitchen when the host started inquiring, after the other guests had arrived and been announced, as to whether the guest of honor, the great Dr. Schweitzer, had arrived. Great embarrassment followed.

When researchers at the Pasteur Institute contacted him about testing a new vaccine for yellow fever at his clinic in Africa he said he would only agree if they tested it first on him. He would not listen to the warnings that it would be unwise for him, a great and valuable world figure, to try the vaccine; he would give the Africans nothing that he would not take himself. Eventually the researchers relented and used Schweitzer as a test subject.

### His philosophy

Albert Schweitzer was true to the Enlightenment principles of reason, naturalism, and thought. Western philosophy and Christianity held that the universe is moral and benevolent. Schweitzer considered the universe a riddle and contended that it is neither moral nor benevolent but neutral. He wrote: “What is glorious is united that what is full of horror. What is full of meaning is united with what is senseless.” Schweitzer and Spinoza were the dissenters to the view that the universe is somehow ordered, but only Schweitzer offered an alternative: Namely, that only man could make our universe meaningful. He acknowledged the Stoic philosophers “as the greatest formal philosophy in human history. To the extent that I can be identified with any school, I should be proud to be related to the Stoics.” Schweitzer was one of the first philosophers to see that Stoicism had led to existentialism.

Schweitzer is known for the ethical framework he espoused around the framework of “reverence for life.” Out of Descartes “I think, therefore I am” Schweitzer proceeds to “yes, but what do I think about?” He writes: “The most immediate fact of man’s consciousness is the assertion: ‘I am life which wills to live, in the midst of life that wills to live.’”

Schweitzer, the Lutheran Minister, joined and identified in his later years with the Unitarians, “who, like him, had separated themselves from the mainstream of Christian institutionalism.” Schweitzer wrote of “the Unitarians who form the historic church of martyrs, composed of people who try to practice what Jesus preached. Their emphasis is on the ethical teachings of Jesus who stood for peace...”

To sum up Schweitzer is impossible. His legacy for me is manifold.

I admire his pursuit of Reason, wherever it may lead. As a preacher, his revelations about the historical Jesus made him an enemy of the established Christian church. He took his controversial stance not for fame but because that is where his research led in his search for historical truth.

His activism against war and nuclear weapons were unnecessary to his medical mission. But his humanity demanded that he speak out in hopes that his powerful voice would make a difference.

He never sought wealth. All he made, and all he could gain from his lectures, his many books, his concerts, and his Nobel Peace Prize went into his African clinic

and to the care of the people he had set out to help, one at a time. He was a true representative of the “starfish philosophy.”

In his lifetime Albert Schweitzer suffered intense grief and pain. He was unjustly a prisoner of war. He was grieved by the course of western civilization in the twentieth century and he did a great deal through both his teaching and his personal example to rectify it. He provided an ethical touchstone for us. He offers us an example of the courageous pursuit of truth wherever it may lead. He made the world more beautiful with his exposition of the works of Bach. He provides an ideal of what one person can accomplish to make this a better world. What more could we hope for in a human being?

Bob Weekley, February 22, 2004