

God's Diplomat

Dag Hammarskjöld.

JOSH JETER

“A man for our time.” What could such a miserable phrase mean? It's the sort of thing one hears at a retirement party: bold enough to sound important, vague enough to be void of content. Rarely does one learn what “the time” requires, or what makes a person fit for it, and yet one bands the phrase about with confidence.

Still, here it is: Dag Hammarskjöld was a man for our time.

The son of a one-term Swedish prime minister, Hammarskjöld was born into a long line of distinguished public servants. Young Dag hobnobbed with the Archbishop of Sweden, and met a stream of world dignitaries at dinners hosted in the “family castle” in Uppsala. A voracious reader even as a child, he proved a quick study in art, literature, economics, and law, and became fluent in French, German, and English as well as his native Swedish. He entered civil service early, grew to be a capable administrator, and earned a reputation as an apolitical “technocrat.” He worked hard and inspired trust. He held a top economic post when he was 30 years old; at 36, he headed up Sweden's central bank; at 46, he joined the Swedish mission to the United Nations. And then, at age 51, Hammarskjöld received a call that changed his life.

No one expected the Secretary General appointment, least of all him. Hammarskjöld was not even waiting for the news when it broke. Upon receiving word from a Swedish journalist in the evening between March 31 and April 1, 1953, Hammarskjöld said: “This April Fool's joke is in extremely bad taste: it's nonsense!” One observer of the press conference the next day “had the impression that [Hammarskjöld] had spent the night reading ten books about the United Nations.”

The UN apparently chose Hammarskjöld for his independence. In 1953, the Cold War was heating up, and the UN needed a leader who wouldn't favor any of the world powers. Sweden was neutral; Hammarskjöld was competent. But no one anticipated what Hammarskjöld would achieve during his turbulent eight years in office.

In 1955, he negotiated the release of 11 U.S. airmen held hostage in China; in 1956, he diffused a world war-threatening conflict in the Suez canal; and he helped delay a major catastrophe in the Congo. He faced dissent from some countries—mainly from Russia—and yet retained wide respect, even from his foes. Time and again, Hammarskjöld proved himself impartial, brilliant, vigilant, and loyal to the goals of the UN. When he died, John F. Kennedy said: “Next to [Hammarskjöld], I realize that I am a small man. He was the greatest statesman of our century.”

But why should we talk about Hammarskjöld now, fifty years after his death? Why does Hammarskjöld matter, and what makes him “a man for our time”?

One answer is that Hammarskjöld's death—in a September 1961 plane crash over what is now Zambia—remains a mystery. A book released in 2011 raised fresh questions, and the new evidence was strong enough for the UN to reopen their formal investigation in July 2012. The notion that Hammarskjöld was murdered persists.

The fuller answer, however, has to do with the content of Hammarskjöld's life. Hammarskjöld's legacy today stands upon two pillars. He was a diplomat and a leader who ably guided the UN; he was also a deeply spiritual



man, one who led a life of unusual depth. Few knew exactly what Hammarskjöld believed during his life, and yet the portrait one finds after his death is that of a devout man. Hammarskjöld had left a sheaf of papers titled “Markings” in his New York apartment with a cryptic note: *If you find [these] worth publishing, you have my permission to do so—as a sort of white book concerning my negotiations with myself—and with God.*

Markings, the book that emerged, is a strange and wonderful affair. Published two years after his death, the book presents an inspiring account of Hammarskjöld's complicated inner life. He was not only a politician, it seems, but also a mystic of sorts. In *Markings*, he turns to Thomas à Kempis, the Psalms, and Meister Eckhart often, and speaks of a dynamic, ongoing exchange with the divine. Hammarskjöld, it seems, drew great light and focus from his inward life.

Until now, biographies of Hammarskjöld have focused on either the public or the private man. Brian Urquhart wrote a great volume on Hammarskjöld's public life, while several small works have provided portraits of Hammarskjöld's spiritual life. In each, one finds him portrayed as a diplomat or a pilgrim, a career man or a monk. Each account is fair, but the man is most compelling in the integration of the two. All of which is reason to celebrate Roger Lipsey's excellent new biography *Hammarskjöld: A Life*.

As an international statesman on a large stage, Hammarskjöld paid close attention to the God-ward motion of his soul. This on its own is not rare, for many politicians are religious, but few have recorded that movement with such precise language. The result, as *The New York Times* said of *Markings* upon release, is “perhaps the greatest testament of personal devotion published in this century.”

There is an age-old tension in religious writing between engagement with and withdrawal from the world, between action and contemplation. Anthony fled into the desert in the third century, and the debate has raged ever since. The politician complains about the monk who cloisters, and the monk complains about the politician who lacks a compass. Neither sees the other in full, and perhaps both have a point. Can a monk pass through the world and keep silent? Does activity always mean distraction? Can one stay attentive to God in the midst of a busy life? These ancient questions of the spirit are vexing in practice. And yet Hammarskjöld offers some fragment of a response. In his inner life, he was a man of monastic sympathy, focused on humility, prayer, and love; in his outer life, a statesman of the highest rank. It is a strange combination to witness, all

the more curious for the impact it left on the world. John Steinbeck said the news of Hammarskjöld's death was “so devastating” to him that it was “hard to think.” *The New York Times* echoed the sentiment: “How can the power of this irreplaceable man be analyzed? . . . In an age of violence, he had gentleness.”

But for Hammarskjöld the road of the inner life was anything but easy. In *Markings*, the reader finds turmoil, doubt, and uncertainty, and the resolution is rarely neat and clean. Hammarskjöld graciously complains about no one but himself, yet spares himself no scrutiny. And one cannot help but admire the honesty. (Consider, for example, this scathing entry from his early years: *Praise nauseates you—but woe betide him who does not recognize your worth.*) For Hammarskjöld, the inner life was not a matter of lofty, occasional prayer, but of patience and honesty amid everyday experience. The inner life was the center, and the public life spread from there.

His public life was ravaged by conflict, but Hammarskjöld oriented that conflict toward God. Upon unanimous re-election to the post of Secretary General in 1958, he scrawled *thy kingdom come, thy will be done* on a scrap of paper. He rarely spoke of belief in public, but saw even the smallest details of his life events through that lens.

Indeed, *Markings* reflects a brilliant, conflicted man, and the book feels almost Psalm-like in variation. Doubt, hope, ecstasy, loneliness, love: Hammarskjöld renders them all in striking color. And yet one also senses a distinct forward movement as years pass. Hammarskjöld's entries before 1952 are beautiful but bleak, and he broods often over the loneliness of public life. But then something happens, or perhaps a new discovery is made. As the clouds begin to part, Hammarskjöld notes:

Now you know. When the worries over your work loosen their grip, then this experience of light, warmth, and power. From without—a sustaining element, like air to the glider or water to the swimmer. An intellectual hesitation which demands proofs and logical demonstration prevents me from “believing”—in this, too. Prevents me from expressing and interpreting this reality in intellectual terms. Yet, through me there flashes this vision of a magnetic field in the soul, created in a timeless present by unknown multitudes, living in holy obedience, whose words and actions are a timeless prayer.

—“The Communion of Saints”—and—within it—an eternal life.

This was a sensitive man in a noisy role; a man who carried a great load but was able, in increasing amounts, to bear it lightly. *In Thy wind—in Thy light*, Hammarskjöld scribbled in his later years, *how insignificant is everything else, how small are we—and how happy in that which alone is great.*

In another typical entry from *Markings*, Hammarskjöld reflects on his public role, and the possibility of active, divine involvement:

You are not the oil, you are not the air—merely the point of combustion, the flash-point where the light is born.

You are merely the lens in the beam. You can only receive, give, and possess the light as a lens does.

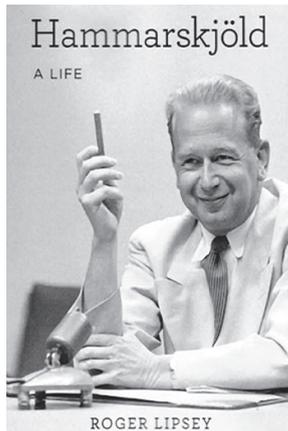
If you seek yourself, “your rights,” you prevent the oil and air from meeting in the flame, you rob the lens of its transparency. Sanctity—either to be the Light, or to be self-effaced in the Light, so that it may be born, self-effaced so that it may be focused or spread wider.

Lipsey's biography is meticulous, sensitive, and sharp, and one can only hope it will inspire a revival of interest in Hammarskjöld. It is no minor job to organize the man into a readable narrative, yet Lipsey handles the task with great skill. He has all the traits a reader wants in a biographer: a warm heart, a pair of scrupulous eyes, and a responsible, measured voice. He captures both the inner and outer Hammarskjöld with equal attention, and the reader trusts his assessments. In Hammarskjöld, we find no wall between devotion and action but rather daily integration in a God-oriented life.

Hammarskjöld

A Life

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