

Is There a True Selfishness?—Fiorello H. LaGuardia

By John Stern

Aesthetic Realism, the education founded by philosopher, poet, and critic Eli Siegel, answers Yes, there is a true selfishness. As he explains in his book *Self and World*:

We cannot be whole beings if we are not fair to what is not ourselves. It is incumbent on ourselves, therefore, to be fair; that is, to be altruistic. . . . To be selfish is to be the whole self; to be the whole self is to have a sense of otherness. ⁽¹⁾

This is not the customary way of seeing selfishness, and it is certainly not what I went by. Like most people are, I was absorbed with myself: what I felt and wanted, and what I thought was coming to me. Then, in the first Aesthetic Realism class I attended, Mr. Siegel asked me:

If you had a gift from a benign spirit, and he said, “John Stern, we can bring about a good change,” what would you like it to be?

John Stern—I want people to like me more.

Eli Siegel—Do you feel you want to like people?

JS—I’m not sure.

ES—Do you say, “I don’t want to like people,” and they know it a little?

Mr. Siegel wanted me to see that what hurt me most was my own attitude to other people, not what they did or didn’t do. He made

this beautiful, efficient suggestion:

I recommend to John Stern that he consciously resolve to learn from other people. The secret of your self is to be found in other people.

This was the beginning of my education in what Mr. Siegel meant when he wrote, “to be selfish is to become the whole self; to be the whole self is to have a sense of otherness.

1. Fiorello LaGuardia: A Deep Sense of Otherness

A person who had an uncommonly deep and sincere “sense of otherness” was Fiorello Henry LaGuardia, renowned three-term mayor of New York City. His notion of himself was inextricably bound up with fighting for the rights of other people. He was unselfish in wide-ranging ways, fighting tirelessly for what people deserve, often against overwhelming opposition. He was energetic, passionate, shrewd, imaginative, battling, and ethical.



Only 5'2" tall, he loomed large in the hearts and minds of millions of New Yorkers and others, and he still does, 70 years and more

later. As mayor he worked to have people's physical surroundings at home and at work, their public services, recreation, and the laws that affected them beautiful, efficient, and fair. He was troubled by the kinds of narrow selfishness most of us are governed by—some of the most colorful stories about him have to do with this. Yet, perhaps more than anyone else in twentieth-century politics, he shows how much we want to care for ourselves by being fair to the outside world.

2. A Life and Ethics Begin

Fiorello LaGuardia was born in 1882 on Sullivan Street in Greenwich Village. His parents had emigrated from Italy. His father was Achille Luigi Carlo LaGuardia and his mother, Irene Luzzatto Coen, was of a cultivated Austrian-Italian-Jewish family. In America Achille enlisted in the Army as a bandmaster, and for several years his family lived on a succession of army posts, where the young Fiorello saw the cruelty that comes from narrow selfishness. He saw government agents cheating the Native Americans they were supposed to protect, and U.S. soldiers sent to protect an employer's property against striking workers. He read about the corruption of Tammany Hall as it governed New York City.

Aesthetic Realism explains that a person meeting injustice and ugliness can either use them to be cynical and damn the world—as most people do, and I certainly did—or to oppose them in order to have the world more beautiful. The first way is contempt—"the disposition in every person to think he will be for himself by making less of the outside world." The second—the deeper hope—is to respect the world and the things in it. As Eli Siegel explains in the international periodical, *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*,

How does one like himself?—that is, how is one successfully selfish or gracefully selfish? The only way for this is for a person's liking how he sees things. ⁽²⁾

As soon as LaGuardia had the opportunity to oppose injustice, he took it. For example, as consular agent in Hungary at age 22, he defied the Archduchess Josefa of Austria-Hungary. She wanted to watch her “colorful” peasants boarding ship for America. But then they would have to wait aboard, crowded and sweltering, for three days until the ship sailed. LaGuardia felt this was unkind and he refused to issue the permit.

Later, back in America, he became an interpreter at Ellis Island. He spoke Italian, German, Yiddish, Croatian, French, and Hungarian. He earned his law degree at night, and helped ease the way for immigrants bewildered by officials and exploited by sharpies. When 70,000 garment workers in New York City went on strike in 1912, he helped their union win recognition.

Politics in America is notorious for its selfishness. The main purpose of most politicians is to advance themselves, help the people who can help them, and occasionally do something that makes them look good to their constituents.

When he entered politics in the 1920s, LaGuardia sometimes had to use questionable tactics such as stuffing ballot boxes, mud-slinging, and even occasional violence. He had to fight Tammany Hall with its own tactics, and the Tammany Tiger was no kitten. But once in office, LaGuardia went about being fair to the people he represented so comprehensively that he is likely unique in American political history. He had ethical integrity, and compassion for the people who didn't have a fair chance: those exploited

by laws that protected the rich at the expense of the poor. Arthur Mann, in his careful biography *LaGuardia: A Fighter Against His Times*, writes of LaGuardia's misgivings about elections:

The use of questionable means to achieve a justifiable end troubled [him], who would have preferred to live in a world where he did not have to be schizoid. He told an assistant, "I only know that when I win I'll help the little guy. If I have to fight this way, it's only because I want to do the most and best for all the little guys." ⁽³⁾

3. In Congress

In 1922, LaGuardia was elected to Congress representing East Harlem. This occurred at a painful time in his personal life: just after his wife and baby daughter died of tuberculosis. This experience seems to have made him deeper and more determined to have other people's lives better. For the next ten years as a Congressman, he fought against selfish manifestations of profit economics such as child labor, high food prices, and court injunctions that prohibited workmen from organizing. He introduced legislation in favor of such progressive ideas as unemployment insurance, rent control, policing of the stock exchange, publicly owned power, and a vast public works program—most of which later were enacted under the New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

LaGuardia wanted to make economics more humane and kinder. Yet had he been able to learn from Eli Siegel and Aesthetic Realism, he could have understood the contemptuous selfishness that is at the very basis of profit economics, and he would have been more against it. He also could have learned about the place in every person where that selfishness begins, and heard criticism of

the narrowness in himself which caused him pain, even in the midst of so much goodness all his life.

4. Two Kinds of Anger

Aesthetic Realism explains that there are two kinds of anger. One is against ugliness and injustice, and this LaGuardia had in abundance. Then there is another kind of anger that comes from an inaccurate and unjust way of seeing which, as Eli Siegel describes it, “takes form often as hectic peevishness, a smug sulkiness, an ugly outburst, a covert sarcasm....This kind of anger is a change of displeasure with ourselves, or guilt, into displeasure with what is not ourselves.” ⁽⁴⁾

Even as LaGuardia was becoming an ethical force in America, he sometimes had this “hectic peevishness.” Arthur Mann tells us that he was:

hasty, short-tempered, and ambitious for. . . power. Indiscreet, he easily insulted people. . . . His aides put up with his temper tantrums, his screaming, his abusing everyone because of a paper he couldn't find, but which was in his own pocket. ⁽⁵⁾

LaGuardia was troubled by his angers and sometimes tried to make up for them:

Unable to apologize outright, he might turn to [the aide] and make amends by telling [him] to go out and buy coffee and pastrami sandwiches for everyone. ⁽⁶⁾

His angers made for careless mistakes, yet he could be critical of himself. Once, when he gave a position to someone who turned

out to be ethically undeserving, he said: “When I make a mistake, it’s a beaut.”⁽⁷⁾ That statement, with its straightforward self-criticism, became famous, and is a sign of how much LaGuardia wanted to be fair.

5. LaGuardia as Mayor

Fiorello LaGuardia served three terms as mayor, from 1933 to 1945. During those Depression years, which forced one out of four New York City families to go on relief, nevertheless the city was being transformed. Thanks to LaGuardia’s friendly and beneficial relations with President Roosevelt, the city began to obtain millions of dollars in federal aid. As a result, slums began to be replaced with airy public housing (here he speaks at the opening of Red Hook Houses in Brooklyn).



There were new municipal hospitals and subways were extended. Many parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, highways, and bridges were built, their planning and construction expedited by Robert Moses.

There were changes in government too. For decades, city governments under Tammany Hall had been notable for the “me-first”

attitude of most officials, and for enormous waste of resources. But under LaGuardia and his commissioners, municipal government became a symbol of fairness on a citywide scale, with his principle of “government with a soul.” This is because the mayor’s notion of himself was so deeply bound up with fighting for the rights of other people.

Meanwhile, his personal life flourished. In 1929 he married his personal secretary, Marie Fischer, and when he was mayor they adopted two children. Yet as the years in City Hall passed, his irritability increased. He felt frustrated by not being able to do all he wanted for New York. He also felt thwarted by opponents, and disappointed by President Roosevelt in his hopes for an office with national responsibility. The struggle inside himself between the grand selfishness of being fair to seven million people, and the selfishness of petulant angers, bitter sarcasm, and humiliating others, became steeper. He became weary and less careful, and he was subject to illnesses.

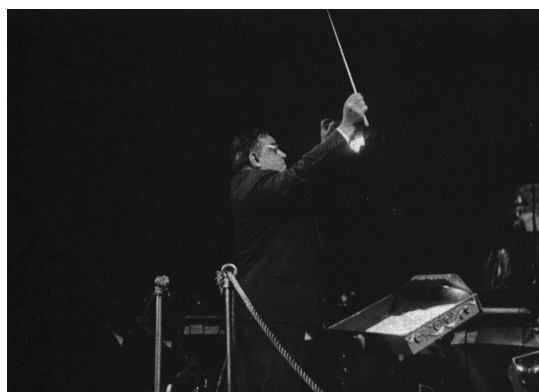
I have learned that to be truly selfish we have to hope to be fair to what is not ourselves, to have as much of the world within us as we can. LaGuardia had much of that diversity. He spoke six foreign languages; had an Italian, Austrian, and Jewish background; married first a Catholic and later a Lutheran, and was an Episcopalian himself. One of the chief reasons people remember him is because he went for otherness in such a vigorous, snappy, stylish way, as he took part zestfully in the happenings and activities of the great city. He often raced to serious fires.



He relished throwing out the first baseball of the season, and here he honors Lou Gehrig at his retirement from the New York Yankees.



He conducted the Sanitation Department Band,



greeted visiting notables, and opened public works of all kinds—such as driving the first train on a new subway line.



And in the summer of 1945, when the newspaper deliverers went on strike, the children of New York City heard him reading the comics on WNYC, the city's own radio station.



“To be selfish is to be the whole self; to be the whole self is to have a sense of otherness” writes Mr. Siegel. Fiorello LaGuardia went for otherness in ways large and small, and it is one reason he has meant so much to so many people. He shows what every person is looking for, both when he was at his best, and also when he was so clearly displeased with himself.

I wish that he had been able to meet Eli Siegel and the knowledge of Aesthetic Realism, because LaGuardia—who gave courage and happiness to so many others—would have gotten even greater courage, and the full happiness he hoped for, for himself.

¹ Siegel, Eli, *Self and World* (New York: Definition Press, 1982) p.279

² Siegel, *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known* (New York: The Aesthetic Realism Foundation, 1976, No. 173

³ Mann, Arthur, *LaGuardia: A Fighter against His Times* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B.Lippincott Co., 1959) p.244

⁴ Siegel, *Self and World*, p.57

⁵ Mann, pp. 42, 331

⁶ *ibid*, p. 331

⁷ *New York Daily News* magazine, April 12, 1981, p.32