

Queen Elizabeth's 21st Birthday Celebration Is a Model for Today's Youth

The most memorable speech that Queen Elizabeth II ever gave was five years before her coronation. It was delivered in 1947 on a radio broadcast from South Africa, where she was on a royal tour with her parents and her sister. The occasion was her 21st birthday.

Nowadays a 21st birthday is a milestone marking the passage from dependence to independence, a celebration of liberation, of doing it my way. The young queen-to-be saw things differently.

"I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong," she said.

It may be an old-fashioned way of speaking, but Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor knew that she had a *vocation*, a calling, a dedication to something higher than herself. Whether or not she knew of John Henry Newman's famous prayer, she would have approved: "God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another."

Building a new world after the devastation of the War would be difficult, Elizabeth told her worldwide listeners, and "we must give nothing less than the whole of ourselves."

Her vocation as Queen was not one that she chose for herself, but one given to her by history. She never expected to become Queen. Her uncle Edward was the Prince of Wales and was meant to inherit the throne. But he threw it over for a divorced

American gold-digger, Mrs. Simpson. After his abdication her father George became king and suddenly young Elizabeth was the heir apparent, and, in due course, the Queen. Instead of being a fifth wheel in the British royal family, she was behind the steering wheel.

Somehow she remained unspoiled by her privileged position. During the grim days of the War, she trained as an auto mechanic, perhaps the first time since Boadicea that a Queen of England dressed for battle.

"There is a motto which has been borne by many of my ancestors—a noble motto, 'I serve,'" Elizabeth explained in her birthday broadcast. And quiet dedication marked the rest of her long life.



Princess Elizabeth explaining her expertise to the Queen Mother in April 1945 / International Museum of World War II

Service as the Queen of the United Kingdom may not seem onerous. As the United Kingdom's monarch, she had wealth and castles, horses and corgis, servants at her beck and call every day of her life. But in return, she surrendered her private life. She was a mere constitutional figurehead, and personal likes and dislikes had to be subordinated to the dignity of her high office. Constantly in the public eye, she had to remain placid, lips pursed, unperturbed as her family's dirty linen was washed in public over and over again. Could any amount of money have made up for the pain of watching the marriage of Charles and Diana disintegrate, of seeing Andrew's seedy recreations exposed, of watching Harry and Meghan malign her to Oprah?

Americans call those who lived through the War the "greatest generation." On the other side of the Atlantic, Elizabeth was

one of those. Duty came first.

Back to her speech as a young woman: “Will you, the youth of the British family of nations, let me speak on my birthday as your representative?” she asked. “Now that we are coming to manhood and womanhood it is surely a great joy to us all to think that we shall be able to take some of the burden off the shoulders of our elders who have fought and worked and suffered to protect our childhood.”

How many 21-year-olds today speak with that maturity? How long will we have to wait to see her like again?

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