

12th August 2023

Theft

**“They do not know how to do right,’ declares the Lord,
‘who store up in their fortresses what they have plundered and looted.’”**

Bible, Amos 3:10

José Julián Martí Pérez – most often known simply as José Martí – was a 19th century Cuban nationalist, poet and philosopher, who was seen as a national hero because of his role in the liberation of his country from Spain. He is also an important figure in literature and political theory, and he has given me a new understanding of theft.

My concept of theft has always been the taking of something that does not belong to you, thus depriving the rightful owner of their continued possession of it. But in a book of Martí's quotations entitled, "Thoughts" – *Pensamientos* – edited by Carlos Ripoll in 1994, I found this:

Talent is a gift that brings with it an obligation to serve the world, and not ourselves, for it is not of our making. To use for our exclusive benefit what is not ours, is theft. Culture, which makes talent shine, is not completely ours either, nor can we place it solely at our disposal. Rather, it belongs mainly to our country, which gave it to us, and to humanity, from which we receive it as a birth right. A selfish man is a thief.

If "a talent ... brings with it an obligation to serve the world", what am I doing if I don't make use of that talent to serve others. This is the point I was making a while ago: to drive ourselves into an early grave is to deprive the world – and God – of years of dedicated service. How selfish is self-sacrifice then, I wonder?

A selfish person is a thief! Powerful stuff. What we have – the essence of life itself – is not ours to use or abuse as we see fit. It is part of a bigger entity. It belongs to the whole of humanity, for the benefit of all. And if we wish to put the "God" label on that, it ultimately belongs to the God who gave it to us as a gift. However you look at it, if life is not used well, we have stolen what was never ours by right.

I thought I knew what theft was, so I could point the finger of blame at those who take what doesn't belong to them. But Martí has made me look at myself. Might I be a thief who's "plundered and looted" too? And I thought Amos of old was pointing an accusing finger at someone else.

A prayer for today

Lord, forgive me for stealing, and storing what I have in the fortress of my selfishness. Amen

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