DUBIOUS METTLE OF THE MEDALS

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Category: Opinions

By Edmond Y. Azadian, The Armenian Mirror-Spectator (p.14), 16 November 2013

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The Russian novelist Anton Chekhov once wrote a satirical short story about the significance of medals in 19th-century Russian society. The story dwells on the predicament of a poor teacher who is invited to a dinner party in high society circles. To prove that he deserves the honor, he decides toborrow a medal from a friend. Upon arriving at the party, however, he encounters an acquaintance, who knows that he has not received such an honor. The teacher tries to hide the medal, devising many ruses which eventually spoil the dinner and the evening. But before taking his leave, he discovers that his acquaintance is also in the same boat, trying to hide his own borrowed medal.

Chekhov ridiculed characters chasing such vanities. He died in 1905 and yet, since then, not much has changed in that part of the world when it comes to tributes.

The Soviet inheritors of the Russian Empire also stressed the significance of those medals, to the point that many anecdotes and jokes were cracked about Leonid Brezhnev, a particular devotee of medals. As the chevrons on his lapel extended, Armenians were wondering that they had never seen hyphenated chevrons.

Today, those coveted medals can be bought at the Vernissage, the glorified flea market in Yerevan, for pennies. But, on the other hand, the tradition seems to be entrenched in Armenia so much so that pretty soon no tourist will return from Yerevan without a medal awarded by an authority or agency in Armenia.

The same may apply also to the church. It looks like soon the recipients of medals will outnumber Armenians who have been deprived of such honors.

In the past, the people who were awarded such medals were few and far between. But today, the abundance of such medals leaves everyone baffled and devalues the honor. Some recipients even wonder what good deed they have done for Armenia in order to deserve such honors.

It looks as if the time has come to revise the value system in Armenia, where they seem to be banking on the naiveté of Diasporan Armenians. It is true that for some people, those medals serve as an effective bait to get them to make some contributions. But, as time goes on, with the proliferation of those honors, the value system is undermined and deserving people cannot be distinguished from the ones who have taken the bait and been elevated to a rank to which they don't belong.

There is a saturation point where the law of diminishing returns is activated.

Yet another group in the diaspora is critical of generous distribution of those questionable honors, that is, until their turn arrives. At that point, they believe that unlike undeserving honorees, they are meritorious and have fully earned the honors.

But eventually, they are bundled in the same batch of people who had been wearing those medals, whether they deserved them or not.

Come to think, by the unrestricted dispensation of those medals, the authorities, eventually, insult the intelligence of the Diasporan Armenians, believing that those methods can buy influence, loyalty and sacrifice.

Any contribution to or sacrifice for Armenia loses its value the moment the motivation becomes reciprocal compensation. And unfortunately, our poor homeland has not much more to offer than those pieces of metal to reward those contributors. It is really very difficult to differentiate who is more naïve: the people who shower those honors or those who get the medals? Maybe both.

When those medals were awarded sparingly, the recipients were distinguished members of the community and they stood above the multitudes. But today, when the spigot of those awards has been turned loose, the value of those medals is dead on arrival.

Individuals with self-esteem need to think seriously if the medals they have received truly signify an appreciation for a righteous deed or whether they have been decorated with an ulterior motive.

Of course, the generous distribution of medals needs to be distinguished from the prizes awarded to the writers, scientists, scholars and performers by the government or by other organizations, since the latter come with monetary compensation, which will go a long way to inspire new pieces of literature or composition, or new volumes of academic work.

Now that there is a large army of medal bearers, where do we begin to raise our value system?

Of course, the change has to begin from the top. But before adopting a new system, there has to be a change in our people's mentality and attitude. Brezhnev is dead and his medals have been buried with him; we cannot buy them at the Vernissage anymore.

Once we change our mentality, it would be rather easy to come up with a new value system.

Committees of unbiased and qualified scholars may be assigned with the task; people who truly are familiar with the face (and the heart) of the diaspora and Armenia. They can come up with a short list of candidates who should be vetted properly, before being nominated for the awards. That way, no recommendation can be smuggled on the list of nominations if all they have done is treat a minister to lunch or given a lavish present.

During the last 21 years, from the ashes of the ragtag fighters an effective army was formed in Armenia. Legislative and executive branches of government were put in place.

Therefore, Armenia's value system should also correspond to those developments. If fewer people from the diaspora are medaled, the Diasporan-Armenians will feel more honored, not less, if and when their turn comes.

If today Anton Chekhov were to be resurrected, I have no reason to hide my own medals. But, in my soul searching, I will always wonder where I stand in the value system of those who have awarded the medals to me.

Note: This article is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend, the late Arsen Demerjian who motivated me to write about this topic before his untimely death.