

Simplicity and Service

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered at Birmingham Meeting
April 21, 1996

Not long ago I had lunch with a friend who is a school social worker. She came late for our appointment because she had had to go out in search of a six-year-old who had wandered away from school because of a minor quarrel he had had with a classmate.

In discussing her work as a school social worker my friend said that she was mainly engaged in crisis intervention -- getting meals for children who are hungry, seeing that a pair of glasses was obtained for one who could not see, searching for someone who had been lost track of. The pressure of such happenstances prevented her from really dealing deeply with students and their problems over a long period of time. Yet my social worker friend said that she loved her job, that it was absolutely necessary work, and that she knew that if she were not available to do it someone else would have to be appointed to carry it on instead.

This conversation brought to mind the image given in the novel *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse, when the protagonist, after a strenuous spiritual search, finds joy and peace serving as a ferryman, carrying people back and forth across a river, not knowing from whence they came or where they were going, but confident that he was rendering a valuable service in helping life on its way.

It also brought to mind Jesus' well know parable of the good Samaritan, who, upon picking a stranger up off the road and depositing him at a hostelry with funds for his care, went away without never knowing the exact outcome of his effort.

The Friends meeting to which I belong conducts a shelter program for homeless people. Undoubtedly, some of the people who make use of this service come again and again, and we get to know them, and can take some satisfaction from seeing them evolve more closely toward the destiny they were intended to have, perhaps partly in response to the efforts we have made to provide a loving community as well as a roof over their heads. But many people pass through this program of whose ultimate fate we know nothing.

Many Friends have read the very fine book entitled "*Lest Innocent Blood Be*

Shed." It recounts the story of the people of the French Protestant village of Le Chambon who, when France was occupied by the Nazi's during the Second World War, at great risk to themselves, organized an underground railroad to allow the escape of Jews. Hundreds of lives were saved through their heroic efforts. Yet, of course, the number was pitifully meager in comparison to the need which existed. These courageous villagers could not know the outcome of their efforts, could not know if each of the particular families they helped ever actually achieved safety, nor could they see the rebuilt lives of those who did. Nor could they waste much of their spiritual energy asking themselves how many saved lives were worth the risks they were taking, nor could they distract themselves decrying the fact that there was no imaginable way that the collapse of the Third Reich could be brought about as a result of their efforts. Nothing would have been accomplished by these trains of thought. Out of their centered calmness and faith they saw what needed to be done. They assessed the resources available with which to do it. Their effort was cost-effective, efficient, well-organized, quiet and discreet. They not only saved lives, a miracle in itself, but they bequeathed to us and to people of the future a vision of how hope and truth can be lived practically, even in the midst of one of the darkest hours that humanity has ever known.

It is not only our pursuit of material possessions which distracts us from the Lord's work. A true simplicity of heart not only allows our attention to be given to service, rather than to self-centered material gratification, but it also allows us to seize the opportunity to put Truth into action, while letting go of the need to see ego-gratifying results.

There is nothing wrong with assessing the relative effectiveness of different courses of action open to one, nor with being well organized, nor with developing some long range plans. What is useless of the seeking of rewards or results lodged in one's own ego -- particularly the need to think of oneself as a clever, powerful, or effective, or as having one's own way with the unfolding drama of the Creation.

Once I had the privilege of descending into the Grand Canyon on the back of a mule. The Canyon is over 5,000 feet deep, that is, its walls are over five times as high as the World Trade Center in New York City. As one descends into the Canyon, one passes layer after layer of rock of increasing age. Some of this rock has imbedded in it the fossilized remains of water creatures, left from a remote time when this now arid region was once the bed of a sea. Ultimately, at the very bottom of the Canyon, one comes to rock which is a solidified form of the earth's central plasma -- rocks thought to be fully half as old as our planet itself. And as one gazes upward from the bottom of the Canyon, past all the strata of rock from different ages and eons, up to the very rim, one realizes that the time that human beings have walked upon this earth is represented only by the top two or three inches of all these layers, and one is awestruck at the great and long creative process which has raised us up to where we are.

A true simplicity of heart will know in any given moment if we are acting so as to be at one with this great Creative Principle, or if we are not.

Who shall stay the human heart, asks Saint Augustine, that it may stand in stillness and see how eternity, ever motionless, neither of the past nor of the future, nevertheless utters time past and time to come?

All of us have an inherent capacity to glimpse eternity; indeed those who have cultivated a true stillness and simplicity of heart have it in abundance. Inner silence, the calming of the agitations of our hearts and minds of all that is stubborn and grasping, is essentially an expression of the love of Truth. To be dispassionate, not to let one's needs, emotions or prejudices color one's actions, is essentially to put Truth before everything else. To love Truth in this way is to love God, who is Truth. Thus, inner silence is the same as the love of God. To practice it means that we can participate in political and social life in the fullest sense without demanding anything for ourselves, without there being any narrowness or pettiness of soul to poison our work. It is to establish an inner peace and inner harmony which will allow us to contribute authentically to the growth of outer peace and harmony in the world at large.

Daniel A. Seeger
Birmingham Monthly Meeting
April 21, 1996

D:\WPDATA\ DAN\SP\BIRMNGHM.SP