

October 8, 1985 (Tuesday)

Elaine's comments about spontaneity, and about the sense of the presence of God and the experience of the love of God, bring a number of somewhat disconnected thoughts to mind.

Spontaneity is always an interesting topic for me because I have so often been accused of lacking it, of being overprogrammed and utterly premeditated, and even rigid. My former wife was especially aware of these characteristics of mine!

I have been reading a book by a non-Quaker linguist about the early Friends and their symbolic use of silence and speech. The book is entitled Let Your Words Be Few. It is interesting to read about the number of schisms which arose in the movement from the very beginning. Early on, for example, there was apparently one Friend with a following who refused to remove his hat when George Fox prayed. Another controversy involved whether or not it was correct to predetermine the hour and place for meetings for worship. Was thus planning to gather a violation of the free movement of the spirit? Indeed, what we do here--having someone prepared to introduce a reflection at least in a semi-programmed way--would have been entirely unacceptable to these Friends. According to this line of thought, the only legitimate ministry is that which occurs so spontaneously that the speaker has no more idea than the listener regarding what words are going to come out next.

Such ministry is entirely foreign to my own experience. While I never arrive at a meeting for worship with a plan to speak or with any kind of prepared message, but simply try to become inwardly silent to see if a leading occurs, once I sense an impulse which seems under proper guidance, I find myself planning very carefully what exactly it is I am going to say. This whole process, from leading to refinement, usually takes the best part of an hour, which is why I usually wind up squeezing my message in at minute 59. The once or twice when I rose to my feet with only a leading to speak in a certain direction, with no foreknowledge of where the message would end up, I have regretted having done so.

The spontaneous nature of the sense of the presence of God, and the experience of the love of God, is somewhat paradoxical. There is no way to plan or to force a person to understand or to like Mozart. Yet it is certainly more likely that a person will come to appreciate Mozart if she or he at least has the opportunity to hear the music now and again. With regard to things of the spirit, modern life in many ways seems organized to deprive people of an opportunity to experience the spiritual plane. Many people do not comprehend the spiritual possibilities within themselves. I lived many years in this state.

But once a person does discover this additional dimension to life, even though the exalted state that tends to characterize

its earliest discovery does not last constantly, his or her way of experiencing life does tend permanently to be changed. Something has been acquired which is not easily lost (although it may indeed be lost in some cases) and which has a value beyond any moods which it may or may not sustain.

John Punshon, in his book Portrait in Grey, points out that George Fox and Robert Barclay had slightly different attitudes toward these matters. George Fox felt that God was ever available to anyone who would but turn his will in the direction of seeking. Barclay, on the other hand, believed that invitations or leadings only occurred from time to time, and to miss an opportunity or leading, to fail to respond, is to lose forever its possibility. I guess my own experience squares more with that of Barclay, at least in as much as it seems to me that there is some mysterious way in which this sense is given to us, a way over which we have no control and which seems beyond our mere willing of it to be present and to start operating.

The paradox is that while there is no way we can, through our own human effort, generate a beautiful vision, or a divine illumination, it is also true that those who do nothing to prepare themselves for it, who do not make some sincere and honest effort, will not have it either.

When the vision or experience is given to us, the purpose of it all is not simply to give us a bracing feeling of well-being and spiritual elation. Rather it has the intention of refining and burnishing us so that we may serve as more qualified and fitting instruments of the Divine creative plan. The exhilarating feeling is merely a by-product. There is a danger in getting hung up, therefore, on a search or longing for the recurrence of a mood; it is probably self-defeating in the long run. While Denise's mother may have been harsh enough to incline a child to doubt the validity or possibility of higher spiritual experience, by indicating that those things happened in previous eras, but not in ours, in another sense there was a wisdom in her matter-of-fact approach, in that there are indeed dangers in too much searching after special experiences for one's own spiritual ego.

We do not control the comings and goings of the life of the spirit. We can, however, prepare ourselves to be alert enough to respond to them when they occur. The purpose for which we are given these illuminations is to be more fit to serve. Exalted feelings are a by-product. To get hung up on looking for good feelings as a reward for spiritual effort is to miss the point. Once a spiritual awareness is developed, we at least have the chance to live in a new and different way, and to see life with a better perspective, regardless of the comings and goings of states of feeling.