

September 21, 1986

Yesterday I heard a cry for help from my downstairs neighbor, and upon rushing down to her place found her in a confrontation with a waterbug, an insect resembling a cockroach but about two inches long. The atmosphere was electric with the mutual terror of the waterbug and my neighbor; not having any question in my mind about which side I was on, I darted at the insect intending to stomp on it, but hesitated, not wishing to mess up my shoe when it squished. I sought a broom with which to swat the disturbing creature. In the moment of my hesitation the young man who serves as maintenance worker in our building came in, and without any ado simply picked up the large bug in his hand and with a gently closed fist carried it across the room to the window and tossed it lightly into the flower bed outside.

As he turned away from the window and saw the look of astonishment on the faces of myself and my neighbor he assumed that our reaction resulted from a misconstruing of the insect's predatory capacities, and he simply explained, "They cannot bite you," and went on about his business.

It is said that God is the first, or alpha, and the last, or omega, and also that God is all that is mysterious, inward and hidden, and all that is outwardly manifest and material.

First; last; inward and mysterious; outward and material. Of these four attributes it is the last that is apt to be controversial. Many feel that God is revealed in every aspect of the material world, that all things sing of the One who made them, that to lift a blade of grass or to examine a grain of sand is to be brought immediately into touch with first and last things, with eternity itself. According to this view it is a disorder in the spirit of the beholder which causes repulsion at the sight of a waterbug or of a fish rotting at the side of the road.

But there is another school of thought which regards the material world with suspicion, which dichotomizes the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul, and which sees the material world as a dangerously seductive illusion.

I am unable to take a position regarding these two schools of thought, but I find that the difference between them seems to lessen to the extent that I can cultivate an awareness of the sacramental nature of the present moment—to the extent that I can cultivate a faith that to the consciousness of one rooted in silence there always appears a response in the present moment which is perfectly fitting, which expresses truth. It is not necessary either to love or to loath waterbugs; it is not necessary to vow never to kill a waterbug; it is not necessary to turn one's home into a haven for waterbugs; yet it is possible to realize that in that particular circumstance yesterday the most fitting thing to do was to pick up the poor creature and release it out the window.

This silent awareness of the potential in each moment is very important for those dedicated to peace. For all peace is built on right action in the present. Gandhi correctly observed that every instance of untruth or of violence, if analyzed closely, represents the sacrifice of the present to the interest of some cherished aim in the future. This process of denying the present in the interest of the future begins with a search for the most expedient means, proceeds to the selection of lesser evils, and concludes with the

commitment to last resorts, like nuclear weapons. The whole means and ends equation, so crucial for a nonviolent sensibility, involves this inwardly silent present-centeredness, for means always take place in the present.

A waterbug is a small enough challenge to us to release our mental agitation and to realize the possibilities of expressing truth in the present moment; but it provides practice and preparation for the true challenges which life surely will present to those seeking to be peacemakers and to express truth in both the material and spiritual realms.