

BUT ONE THING IS NEEDFUL

(LUKE 10:42)

**Finding Simplicity, Integrity and Centeredness
Amid the Pressures of Daily Life**

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered as a Concluding Statement
for the Pendle Hill On-the-Road Weekend
Held at Tempe Monthly Meeting
February 26-28, 1993

Once, when I was on my way to London on Friends' business, a friend of mine back in New York asked me to do a favor for him while I was abroad. If I had any spare time after all my committee meetings, he asked, could I seek some hard-to-get phonograph records of popular music? London is apparently a kind of capital for the buying and selling of recordings of the music of contemporary youth.

I sought to fulfill this errand conscientiously, and clutching my list of record albums, began to make the rounds of the "right" places. Naive in the ways of popular culture, I was somewhat startled to find myself in the strange environments of these London record shops. "Shops" is not exactly the appropriate term I suppose. Indeed, one of them was called a *megastore*. Customers had to try to find the disks they sought by wandering through a darkened multi-leveled series of mezzanines with strong colored lights flashing and blinking all about. Large banks of TV screens decorated many of the walls--not one screen, or two, but thirty or forty at once, on all of which was projected the same sequence of bizarre and fantastic images, with an accompanying soundtrack which was broadcast at a deafening volume from every corner of the premises.

The staff of this *megastore*, to the extent that one could see them under these unfavorable conditions, seemed to be attractive enough young people, but their hair was teased so as to stand on end, and was dyed the most peculiar colors. They were made up so as to resemble Count Dracula's mother-in-law, and wore garb as if it were Halloween.

This was an education I undoubtedly could have gotten back in New York City as easily, except it would not have been necessary for a fellow New Yorker to send me on such an errand there.

A few days later I was on my way to Belgium from London for more committee meetings. Friends were using as their meeting place a conference center in a tiny village in rural southern Belgium. Until three or four years previously, our meeting place had functioned as a Benedictine abbey. Parts of the building were a thousand

years old. The village itself was comprised of only two streets, each lined with stone cottages that seemed as old as the abbey which hovered over them. As one looked out from the higher windows of the abbey and over the village, one saw beautiful rolling farmland, lush and green, supporting herds of cows and broken only by the occasional grove of tall trees. The Friday evening that we Friends arrived happened to be Good Friday, and the villagers conducted a procession, carrying torches and following their priest down one of the two streets, stopping every fifty feet or so to pray and to sing a hymn, eventually reaching and entering the little village church.

The abbey too had a chapel but this was not open that Good Friday evening. It had been converted to other uses and bore a sign, "Salle de Fetes." "Ballroom" would, I guess, be an appropriate translation.

The next evening, Easter Saturday, I was in my room, or cell, preparing for the next plenary session of the Quaker conference, when I heard the village stillness interrupted by a harsh sound. I looked out my window towards the source, and saw that at the other end of the abbey the chapel was now all aglow. The peaceful village street had become clogged with parked cars and motorbikes, and the chapel, which had sheltered for centuries the devotions of the Benedictine monks, was now emitting the very same sounds I had heard a few days previously at the London *megastore*, projecting them in all directions across the otherwise peaceful evening landscape.

It was a poignant moment, but a moment in which to watch the movements of the mind and heart. Would it be gripped by the tired, age-old process of the middle aged sensibility lamenting the ways of the young? I must admit that it was hard to resist.

But what came to mind was that this is really not a generational matter at all. The *megastore* and its sounds are the logical outcome of all that has occurred over many recent generations. What was on exhibit that Easter weekend in the Belgian village was two ways of life, one represented by the abbey, and the other by the *megastore*, each of which had exhausted itself, and I thought that we who are concerned for the future need to be aware that in a very real sense we are starting out from scratch, from square one. We are at a new beginning.

I guess we cannot know fully what might be the shape and configuration of the new way of life, the new sensibility, which is trying to come to birth. But it does seem clear that one of its aspects will be a renewed sense of the wonder, the mystery and the miracle of life just as it is given to us, unteased, undyed, unfantastic and undressed-up. It will be a new simplicity, a profound sense of the "mega-blessedness," if you will, of all that is perfectly ordinary.

Every human being is a cluster of needs, yet these needs are not the same in all people, nor unalterable in any one person. There is, I suppose, a fixed minimum

of needs for a human being to remain alive, but there seems to be no fixed maximum. Unlike animals, the human person is a playground for the unpredictable emergence and multiplication of needs and interests, some of which are indigenous to our nature while others are induced by advertisement, fashion, and envy, or come about as miscarriages of authentic needs. We are thrown into ugly tensions when we fail to discern between authentic and artificial needs, when we misjudge a whim for a necessity.

The culture of advertising is designed to exploit this vulnerability. The culture of advertising is so pervasive in American life that it becomes a total educative and spiritual-formation system, one which emphasizes materialism, instant gratification, and a compulsion to have things we really do not need. Advertising usually promotes superfluous products by associating them with sexual adverturism, and our own sexuality thus becomes identified with a general dissatisfaction with life as it is given to us, and with a compulsion to experience it in various teased, dyed and fantastic guises. This flight from reality, begun as an adjunct to commercialism, takes on a life of its own. The reality-obliterating use of hard rock music, drugs, grotesque and violent forms of entertainment, and pornography becomes ever more commonplace.

Needs, even the most superficial needs, are apt to be looked upon to day as if they were holy, as if they contained the quintessence of eternity. Acquiring things, we become enslaved by them. Suppression of a desire is considered a sacrilege that must invariably avenge itself in the form of some mental disorder. We have even come to look upon moral and spiritual norms as nothing but needs in disguise. Most people become unhappy not because of dissatisfaction with what they are--for example, callous to other people's distress and privation--but because of discontent with what they possess.

Yet, even in the face of all this, there is probably not a soul on earth who does not, somewhere deep in inside, acknowledge that life is a dismal affair if it does not give expression to values which are lasting. Yet, oddly, of all the phenomena which take place in the human soul, desires have the highest rate of mortality. They are, in fact, eager to vanish, in that, asserting themselves in order to be quenched, they have inherently the intention to expire. They are totally unrelated to our quest for meaning in existence, which is essentially a quest for the lasting, a quest for abidingness. The true aspiration of the human soul is not that all that is contained in one's own ego may last, but that the self comes to stand for what is lasting. To the extent that our moment to moment living gives expression to eternal things, the difference between time and eternity fades away.

This has both personal and social consequences. A few days ago I found myself immersed in a conversation with a friend who was suffering a bout of depression. He is the sort of person for whom it is very difficult to get a gift because he has everything. I found out I could not identify the exact cause of his being "down in the

dumps," nor did there seem to be any practical means at hand for alleviating his condition. Inevitably, I simply fell back upon the strategy of listening sympathetically.

Later that same day, I happened to watch a tape I had saved of a television broadcast I had missed when it was aired. It was a documentary about the life of the movie actor, Cary Grant. Here was a person who seemed to have led a charmed life. He was a very successful film star and made lots of money. He was blessed with remarkably good looks. As the documentary observed, he was the one every woman wanted to love and the one every man wanted to be. He led a glamorous life in Hollywood. At least one of his six or seven wives was a multi-millionaire. Yet he apparently lived through his long life feeling vaguely miserable.

This seems to be the special challenge to the religious sensibility which modern life presents. Whereas we usually think of the difficulties of grappling spiritually with great disasters--with the sorts of things represented in the book of Job, with the problem of explaining or ministering when enormous disasters overtake good and innocent people--it is the lot of contemporary religious life often to have to address the more prosaic and pedestrian challenge of the joylessness which so frequently occurs in the midst of opulence, in the midst of objective conditions which can only be deemed quite excellent when viewed against the overall scheme of things.

Once, after I returned from travelling in Mexico, I learned that a person with whom I was in fact only casually acquainted, had taken his own life while I was away. This person was in the early vigorous years of retirement, and had no apparent physical illness. He was reputed to have an excellent retirement income, and at any rate, maintained a summer home on the Long Island shore and a townhouse in New York City. Nevertheless, a deepening despondency which could not be reversed overtook him.

Now one cannot travel in a place like Mexico and help but be aware of the tremendous scramble that so many people make just to keep themselves alive. Yet, interestingly, a person such as Father Henri Nouwen discovered that when he went to Latin America to help people there, that indeed there was very little he could do to help, but that nevertheless he himself was greatly uplifted by the tremendous resources of spirit that often exist among people in very desperate circumstances. He wrote a book about his experiences called *Gracias!* In my own life, I remember being touched in this way when seeing that dwellings made of found objects and situated atop a garbage dump in Manila were nevertheless gaily festooned for a festival.

There would be no point in sitting in judgment upon a person in apparently comfortable circumstances who takes his own life. No one can know what a particular life looks like when viewed from within, so to speak. But the paradoxical contrast between the deceased person's situation and the condition of the people I

saw in my travels offers much food for thought: their makeshift shanties and his two houses; their relentless scramble to stay alive and the leisure of his retirement; their love of life and his fatal mental depression.

There are indeed pitfalls to our affluence and leisure. Friends know that to practice the right use of things and the good ordering of time and energy and money are themselves a help to the growth of spiritual consciousness. These, in one sense, are matters of personal spirituality, but a reflection on the contrast between the Long Island man, on the one hand, and the people of Mexico and the Philippines, on the other, brings us to the social dimension. For we live in a world plagued by both grinding poverty and overconsumption. The average American child consumes as much of the world's resources as twenty children born in India. Deliberate and calculated waste is an essential aspect of the American economy. We overeat, overbuy, and overbuild, spewing out our toxic wastes upon the earth and into the air.

Thus our world is split between the fat, prosperous, affluent and the weak, hungry, poor, a gap which is widening with alarming speed. Two thirds of the world, over one hundred nations, suffer chronic food deficiencies, while a handful of wealthy nations have attained the highest peaks of material abundance known in the history of humankind. Indeed, the unchecked expansion of human needs threatens the very survival of life itself. Not only is it the cause of aggressive wars, but it threatens to exhaust the life-giving substance of the planet itself.

I know I scarcely need to explain these things to Friends. In fact, I must admit I am almost afraid to mention them, for here we hit upon what is for Friends a particular and unique invitation to anti-simplicity and anti-centeredness: a guilt-driven compulsion to try to fix everything up by joining enough well-intentioned committees! Not only are we apt, like our fellow Americans, to be trapped in the rat race of acquiring money, and meeting family and business obligations, but we also scramble through an endless series of good works, bowed down under a burden of committees, hurriedly panting through a never-ending program of meetings, appointments and benevolent projects. I suppose the most common spiritual malady in the face of the worsening world situation which I have described is sloth and apathy; the Achilles' heel of Quakers seems to be the opposite--our proneness to being driven into relentless superactivism. We practice a consumerism of causes and committees, and somehow are apt to wind up in the same spiritual state as those who exhaust themselves keeping up with the Joneses.

In a number of different ways this weekend, we have explored two related ideas about simplicity. The first is that simplicity, like compassion or wisdom, is not some accomplishment you achieve once and for all the way one might earn a university degree. It is a touchstone of spiritual life our grasp of which can always grow and deepen. While it is a never-ending quest, it need by no means be a source of frustration. To quote Meister Eckhart, the path is beautiful and pleasant and

joyful and familiar.

The second principle we tried to establish is that our growth in simplicity is best nourished indirectly. A full frontal assault on our lack of centeredness or lack of simplicity, especially an assault the weapon of which is the intellect, is not recommended. Life simply cannot be lived as if it were a debate among the member faculties of the soul, the most persuasive of which always wins the argument. There is probably little use in sitting down and making a long list of activities and trying to prioritize them, or of establishing a long list of potential purchases and deciding which you do or do not need. Reason appears too late on the stage to be effective once compulsions and interests become entrenched, or the mob of anxiety-laced social concerns has laid siege upon our guilt. Our spirits are apt to be unruly, fickle and loathe to accept the hegemony of reason. The war between the disorderly forces of folly, fancy and passion, on the one hand, and reason, on the other, is an unfair war indeed.

What has been proposed instead is a gentle redirecting of attention to Truth, following the admonition, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God," and the cultivation of inner silence as a practice in daily life which is, at root, a way of cultivating an awareness of things as they really are, and of stilling the agitations which interfere with our responding with correct and natural dignity to the claims of authentic living. Our strengthening our capacity to see things from the vantage point of a silent place in our hearts gives recognition to the fact that while with respect to many things growth happens by a process of addition, in connection with the path towards centeredness and simplicity, growth happens by a process of subtraction.

Indeed, to the extent that we can lay down our preoccupations with cravings, with transient concerns, with our businesses, with our special likes and dislikes, with all the accidental phenomenal and passing things which preoccupy us, we begin to make a space within ourselves where universal and eternal things can be heard. Thus through inner silence we become poor in spirit, and becoming poor in spirit brings us closer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Or, as it is written in the *Tao Te Ching*: "The Truth waits for eyes unclouded by longing."

In such silence, something pure, whole, far-shining and all-transcending, something which is both within us and around us, something which is seeking to make Itself known to us, can begin to be heard. This silence is not a vacuum, but is a silence of fullness, of richness, of awareness, a silence out of which we hear the gentle breath of peace, a silence out of which we sense the universal harmonies to

which we hope to dance.¹ In such silence, love rests secure.² Before it, the universe becomes suffused with information, with purpose, with intelligence. Our own inner nature harmonizes with this, and the false human nature cultivated into us by our own abnormal social order falls away. With a heart silent but open, and an intellect still but clear and bright, we find the way to respond to the simple call that rises from the complexity of the situations in which we find ourselves. We need not scramble, because we will know the most useful thing to do, and we will also know that every true gesture, no matter how small, contains all Truth, and every good act, no matter how obscure, expresses all Goodness.

This centeredness of which we speak is essentially a total surrender to God. In such surrender we seek to cultivate a state which is without personal desire, which is satisfied with whatever God provides and allows to happen. We do not become apathetic or inactive. We remain busy, but in the surrender we release all sense of "doership," acknowledging that our wishes for accomplishments are rooted in egotistical desires. To "be still and know that I am God" is to find a stillness which is total surrender, and which is completely free of stubborn grasping or mental agitation of any kind.

Ultimately, one who practices surrender and centeredness comes to understand that the surrender itself is a mirage. For in offering our bodies, souls and possessions to God, we are offering that which is already God's, and not ours to give at all. We realize that at best we can only say, "I falsely imagined until now that all these things which are God's were mine. Now I realize that they are God's and I shall no more act as if they are mine." In effect, this is a recognition that there is nothing but God, that I and mine do not exist; only God exists.

When we are truly in this state of surrender, we find a way of doing things which is without grasping and striving, which is as automatic as breathing in and out. We do not vegetate, but find that right action comes easily and automatically, as if mind, speech and body were merged with God. The good ordering of family life, the right profit of able business dealings, our service to community, all can be seen as an aspect of that very same Creative Principle of divine love which has raised all things up from the dust, and not as something separate and distinct. If we seem to

¹ Paraphrased from Brother David Steindl-Rast, *A Listening Heart: The Art of Contemplative Living*. (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1983). page 23.

² Among many excellent sources of insight into the discipline of silence is a book by Henri J. M. Nouwen: *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981). See especially pages 41-66.

get only small satisfactions and remain driven, nervous and uncentered, we should look to the incompleteness of our surrender. For if we come to the water's edge with a tiny cup, we should not blame the stinginess of the ocean.

The inner silence that we practice, the calming 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 own 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 the practice of inner silence is the same of the love of God. To practice it successfully, if we can, means that we can participate in political and social life in the fullest sense, without demanding anything for ourselves, without there being any pettiness or narrowness to poison our work. It is to establish an inner pace and an inner harmony which will allow us authentically to contribute to an outer peace and an outer harmony in the world at large. We find the way to carry out, with simple and quiet dignity, whatever the situation we are in requires of us.

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

In discussing her work as school social worker, my friend said she was mainly engaged in crisis intervention--getting meals for children who are hungry, seeing that a pair of glasses were obtained for one who could not see, searching for someone who had been lost track of. The pressure of such happenstances prevented her from 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 was not available to do it, someone else would have to be appointed to carry it on instead.

This conversation brought to mind the image 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 and helping life on its way. It also brought to mind Jesus' well-known parable of the Good Samaritan, who, upon picking up a stranger off the road and depositing him at a hostel with funds left for his care, went away without ever knowing the exact outcome of his effort.

The Friends' Meeting to which I belonged when I lived in New York City 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 in seeing them evolve more closely to 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 LeChambon who, when France was occupied by the Nazis 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 accessed 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 the 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.

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

Last time I was in your lovely state, I had the privilege of descending into the Grand Canyon on the back of a mule. The Canyon is over five thousand feet deep, as you know. As one descends into the Canyon, one passes layer after layer of rock of increasing age. Some of this rock has embedded 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 the 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. Knowing that there is no time but this present, the Quaker activist stops to listen, to pay attention, and to be aware. We know that there is no truly beneficial, liberating or healing action which is not rooted in simplicity and centeredness. Imbued with the love and the surrender of which the sages speak, we find we are not torn and fragmented between this or that agenda or among multiple special projects, but rather we become devotees of life itself. By releasing ourselves to Divine guidance we discover our own true self, a self that has been searched and known by the Lord, a self whose days were formed in His book even when they had not as yet come to pass. Getting even just a glimpse of this true self drawn by the Lord out of our unformed substance, we find our lives seized with meaning and with peace. Out of this calm we do not vegetate. We are not passive. Quite the contrary. But whether we take to the wings of the morning, or dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, whether we find ourselves caught up in what is wholly necessary, or whether we have the advantage of holy leisure, we find the grace to leave in our wake a trail of goodness and mercy all of the days of our lives.