

Religion NOW

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

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THE QUEST FOR THE BEST

By all means sometimes be alone;
salute thyself; see what thy soul
doth wear; dare to look in thy chest,
and tumble up and down what thou
findest there.

-William Wordsworth

Everyones life is spent in the pursuit of self-fulfilment, but not everyone reaches their objective. The person who succeeds is one who has realized in time that satisfaction does not come into being from being good at something, but also from being a certain kind of person.

Self-awareness is a most valued character asset. Among our weaknesses are our strong traits. By focusing on these good qualities we may find the courage to start developing our own styles. We begin to accept our true selves.

The trick is to increasingly come to know ourselves, who we are, what we want, and what our capabilities and limitations are.

Usually then we are not content to dedicate our lives to small purposes. We create quality in our ambitions. We start exercising our vital powers to accomplish our determined goals.

I remember when I was a high school student who rode his bicycle from the farm to the high school in the city environment. I was shy, inadequate, and had so much to learn. My English teacher asked me to give, along with the other students, an oral composition. I was frightened speechless and couldn't address the class. She kindly allowed me to give

my speech to her alone after school in her office. She coached me and gave me some confidence in myself. I later determined to master public speaking and with no small effort become a public speaker. In this regard this teacher started me on the road to success.

To seek quality in ones life and work calls for a substantial motive. Such a motive needs to be a sincere, deeply felt urge to find meaning in life and your own part in that meaning. Without such a goal life becomes drab and humdrum. The person seeking the best lifts their head above the crowd to see a horizon fitting their abilities. They push themselves up from colourless mediocrity toward excellence.

This, of course, requires we develop a sense of the true value of things. A sense of values is a personal thing, not to be measured by the metrestick common to all humanity. We can learn to tell truth from falsehood, fact from opinion,

(Quest For the Best, cont'd)

the real from the fake, and the beautiful from the tawdry. We become conscious of the quality of things.

What we are thinking about here is the building of character. Character (integrity) is a positive thing. It is not protected innocence, but practiced virtue; it is not fear of weakness, but love of merit. We find we have our own laws and court to judge us, and these persuade us to do what we would like to be. As Shakespeare said:

"...to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night
the day,
Thou canst not then be false to
anyone."

Such a person knows what they are here for. There are certain things one has to believe in, or civilization will die. There are permanent truths which, though they have their roots in the far past, are important for the present. We come to recognize the dignity of duty, fairness, sympathy, co-operation, justice, and all the things that make life good and a decent society possible.

Today our society is facing moral challenges of great magnitude. Corporatism threatens democracy. Fascist style government in Ontario walks roughshod over the citizens in the pursuit of a selfish ideology. A spirit of selfishness and meanness is growing.

We must recognize that evil does not just happen. It is not the work of blind, neutral forces. People perpetuate it of their own free will, and other people acquiesce to it allowing it to go on. How we all live up to our responsibilities as members of society and community has a direct bearing on the future.

Christianity, along with other religions (ie Judaism, Islam, Baha'i, Buddhism, Taoism, to mention some), recognizes the importance of love and human association as the path to the good life, both for individuals and for society as a whole. The responsibility is not to feed the deserving hungry, or the industrious hungry, or the amiable and well-intentioned hungry, but simply to feed the hungry.

In our search to become our best there is a need to develop a spirit of great-mindedness. We need to take note of debts of honour. We owe so much to those who have contributed to our being where we are today. We will then thankfully do all we can to help and upbuild others.

Each life is a new continent to be explored, developed, and made fruitful in good works. However, it must be understood that so-called good works are *not even good* unless motivated by disinterested love. Love and justice have become part and parcel of that person's being. It is part of their religion now. It reveals the ultimate commitment of a person's life.

Do not be afraid of the quest for the best. Then you will learn with enthusiasm what you need to perform your role; you will discipline your impulses to keep them from getting in the way of wise action; you will do what you do with high standards.

*"Better have failed in the high aim,
as I, Than vulgarly in the low aim
succeed."* -Robert Browning

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The DIVINE POWER of IMAGINATION

The vehicle of the meaning and teaching of the Bible should be our imagination. The word imagination is sometimes debased in meaning, as if it indicated the realm of fancy. But, imagination is the producer of vision, the source of the power to understand truth.

The divine power of imagination within us all creates beauty and surprise, ecstasy and possibilities. It is the outreaching of the mind. Our creativity happens primarily in our imaginations, with the gifts of our imaginations, and our powers of imagining.

Imagination weaves the visual context of knowledge. When sense objects are not present we imagine them as we have seen them.

We use symbols to represent our ideas and knowledge. Symbols are used by us in everyday life and in almost every sphere of human activity - conversation, mathematics, science, sports, government, and religion. Imagination is the chief religious faculty. In the symbols of religion humankind has a way of expressing the meaning of reality. Symbols provide a means of participation in that meaning.

A symbol can be defined as an object or a notion that we can perceive with our senses or grasp with our minds, but in which we see something other than itself. Reason alone will not enable us to perceive the special, the universal, or the eternal in a particular, temporal object. This is the task of creative imagination.

The divine and holy in life can at times perplex us; at other times confront us, and can condemn us when our moral intuition speaks against us reprovingly.

If our spiritual faith is to be real for us in our age, today, we must find words and images through which that

reality can be articulated. As knowledge grows so must our understanding and expression of our faith be coherently known. We must seek the truth that lies beneath the mythology and symbolism of the past so that we might experience that truth.

Biblical Truths

Much of the Bible's truth is to be found in its myths and stories. Biblical myths are dramatic teaching stories told in symbolic language which demand a decision and a commitment. We may call these stories myth-symbols. We must make sense of these stories in everyday experience. We may call such interpretations event-symbols.

An example is the New Testament story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. The dramatic story of Jesus taking a boy's small lunch and mysteriously making it multiply so as to feed a crowd of five thousand people is the myth-symbol.

In reality a much smaller crowd could follow Jesus and his disciples to the wilderness area to talk and picnic. Having children with them they would have packed lunches. When asked what they had to eat they were inspired by Jesus' teaching and the boy's generosity to all share their lunches. Like a pot-luck church supper there was food enough for all with some left over. Here we have the event-symbol.

The meaning of the teaching for us is obvious. When we share and support one another all are cared for. The question facing us is just how to do this.

Allow me another illustration. Last year I was invited to a church in a nearby city to speak on youth

(Meaning in Symbolism, cont'd)

justice. The morning congregation was composed mainly of seniors. I felt they were not empathetic to my topic. The children and youth people listened with interest.

After the service as I returned to my car in the parking lot a well-dressed, middle-aged woman approached me. She said they found few young people attending their services, especially needy kids off the street. She asked me if I could tell her what she could do to interest and help such young people to come to church. I asked her if she would be willing to dress in her everyday clothes and sneakers and come to church and sit in the back pew with them? She looked at me aghast and walked away.

Do you see a relationship to this occurrence, this event-symbol, with the myth-symbol of the gospel story of the Rich Young Ruler? I hope the woman I met above has thought this out and found a way for her and her friends to participate in the challenge of the gospel to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God (Micah 6:8).

A fact of our lives is that we can't live a faith we don't know and we can't know a faith we don't live. The most important thing we do is the manner in which we spend our lives. We can use our imagination for life-enhancing.

DISCERNMENT

Keep my mind ever clear,
Keen and discerning,
From youth to latest year-
I would die learning.

May I ascend life's peak
With perfect timing,
Never low goals to seek-
I would die climbing.

In humans great fight for right,

Let me be daring,
Ever with all my might-
I would die sharing.
-Jean Carter Cochran

Polly Benson of Strasburg, Virginia, sent Helen this beautiful poem to uplift Helen during her convalescence:

*"Take each day as it comes
and live it in peace.
The good thoughts of all who love you
will keep you warm.
Rest easy for everything
will take care of itself
...and each new tomorrow
will find you feeling better."*

Polly added a postscript for the editor: "Ross, did you know that sitting in church doesn't make you a Christian anymore than sitting in a hen house makes you a hen."

I recommend you read the latest book of Bishop John Shelby Spong entitled, "Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes." (HarperCollins \$19.95)

In his lucid, popular style, Spong draws readers into the thoroughly Jewish world of the Gospels, challenging some widespread assumptions about familiar texts.

A house is built of logs and stone,
Of tiles and posts and piers;
A home is built of loving deeds
That stand a thousand years.
-Victor Hugo