

A Handful of Quietness

The other day, I heard a mother say of her romping, mischievous pack of children – who spilled in and out of the house like so many healthy, happy, yapping fox terriers – “my, but they’re a handful!” And they were. Later on – a hurried and harassed business man – whom I asked to be on still one more committee – sighed and said, “O Bill, I have my hands full already.” And he did.

In fact, who among us doesn’t have his hands full? So full of jobs and problems and people and appointments – that we feel like a circus juggler – trying to keep it all going at once. Family, job, school, church, club, committees. Sometimes our hands get too full – we can’t handle it all – our heads get dizzy – we drop things unintentionally. We are not doing as well by the family, job, school, church, club, committees as we know we ought to. So we get very tense and sometimes everything we’ve tried to keep up and keep in balance comes tumbling down in a clatter at our feet, like a juggler dropping all his dumbbells at once. Broken down, we weep.

You know what we need? You do know what we need. With our hands so full – so inevitably, so necessarily full of other things – you know and I know we need what the Book of Ecclesiastes – in a lovely oriental phrase called – “a handful of quietness.” So amidst all the shrieking demands and screaming problems and shrill issues of the day, “her serene majesty” – may well be – on the inside – as H.G. Wells described one of his fictional characters a “walking civil war.” Do you ever feel like that? Of course you do. Sometimes we all need to stop the fighting and seek a short truce – a little peace and quiet, a little rest.

Now I do not mean that we should make “serenity” an end in itself. For I agree with the psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger, that “unrest of spirit is a mark of life; one problem after another”, says Dr. Menninger, “presents itself, and in the continuous solving of them we find our greatest pleasure ... To seek after perfect peace of mind is”, says he, “an illusion.” But I would also agree with him that we all need as well – “the comfort of momentary rest and nightly sleep.”

And some of us do not have even this – not even “one night of quietness.” So we frenetics, we better be aware – take care -- there are some things in this life – that cannot be handled successfully unless we have a resource of quiet, calm strength to call on, to rest in. But where does serenity come from? Americans own 75% of the world’s automobiles, 85% of the world’s television sets and take 95% of the world’s tranquilizers. But these are no substitute for

the serenity that heals the hurts of the soul and body and restores us for further battle. Dante described his beloved but wicked city of Florence as like a mortally sick person, turning and twisting – trying in vain to find a comfortable position – a moment's relief from pain. Many of us today turn and twist like that – the socialite, the gambler, the addict, the hard drinker, the philanderer – all turning and twisting – looking for their serenity – their bit of peace – like a sick person trying in vain to find a position in which to escape the pain, trying in vain to find a bit of comfort.

Where then in this always tiring, often torturing world is one to find his “cup of quietness”? Let me suggest 3 places.

(1) One may find it in what the delightful Quakeress, Elizabeth Gray Vining, calls “the minor ecstasies” of everyday life – in the little things of joy – that take you out of and beyond your tortured self – into a snatched moment of pure peace, profound gladness, little things that cost nothing but sensitive perception, that lift you beyond if even for a moment, and give you your handful of heaven. She lists her own: things like the sight of “crape myrtle (in a) ... downpour; the flute passages in Beethoven's Fourth Symphony; ... shared laughter with an old friend; the whistle of a cardinal high in a sycamore...; the smell of wet wood and seaweed down at the beach; the fragrance of sun-warmed honeysuckle on stone walls.” These were, for her, cups of quietness, like healing balm to the soul of her.

And you remember Rupert Brooke, the Georgian poet, “these I have loved: white plates and cups, clean-gleaming, ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust dancing in the sun; wet roofs, beneath the lamp-light; the strong crust of friendly bread; and many @ food; rainbows; and the blue, bitter smoke of wood.” These were for him his moments of serenity – that helped, healed the soul of him.

I remember a little 11 year old girl, with lots of little brothers, “Monday is my “recovery day” – with her grandmother. We all need such recovery days – “hours of quietness.” Tagore often found his in nature. He wrote: “Be still, my heart, these great trees are prayers.” While the 19th century Japanese poet, Naoyoshi, wrote,

“we've seen the cherry blossoms,
we've viewed the harvest moon.
who dares to say this life
is not worth living after all?”

And there are the beautiful lines of Sara Teasdale,

“Places and faces I know come back to me like music

Hush me and heal me when I am very tired.”

Such moments of quietness, as these, are available to all of us – “organization men and women”, pressured men and women though we be. So collect your own and treasure them and remember them – against hard and hurtful days. And these small serenities will carry even more power to cool, calm and refresh our spirits – if we join George Herbert in the prayer, “Teach me, my God and King, In all things thee to see, and what I do in anything, to do it as for thee.” Our Lord did this – in so many little things he found his evidences of God – a lost lamb, a fallen sparrow, flowers of the field.

(2) In the second place, one ought to be able to find one’s “serenity” not only in the “minor ecstasies” of the great world of nature and man, but also in the security of one’s home life and home loves.

Surely home ought to be as busy as an airport terminal, with all the energy of active life, pouring in and out the doors, but at the heart of it, there also ought to be a serenity, a healing love. Tennyson said about his wife, “the peace of God came into my life before the altar when I wedded her.” She was his stabilizing force – his cupful of quietness. On a century-old tombstone in the graveyard of the Episcopal Church in Hillsboro, I found this inscription for the Parson’s wife: “Sacred to the memory of Sara Greene: Pious toward God and Faithful and Lovely in All the Relationships of Life.” I’m quite sure, in the home that woman made, some man found his “bit of serenity.” The family of Louisa Alcott, author of Little Women, moved 29 times in her first 28 years of life – but the atmosphere of that Alcott home was always one the family could come back to for happy recovery from the hard knocks of life. In the Christian family, one ought to be able to find one’s “bit of serenity.”

(3) In the 3rd place, one ought to be able to find peace among one’s Christian friends. In writing to Corinth, Paul said of certain of his friends, “they refreshed my spirit.” Phillips translates this, “they are a tonic to me.” In the last chapter of Romans he lists 30 of these refreshing people by name. Now some people we know can scarcely be called a “refreshment” for they bring no lift to the spirits – they are rather like caustic grouches who are no tonic to anybody. But there are others who have John Bunyan’s “gaiety and seriousness at once” – they can talk to you without trying to sell you anything – they have a pair of smiling eyes and

wrinkles around a grin – that make February seem like April, and to hear their voice, to share their laughter, their courage, their hopeful outlook on life – is to be refreshed indeed – to gain a “cup of quietness” – enough to go on for hours and hours, days and days.

This ought to be especially true among the friends of God, the Christian community.

In the 3rd century A.D., a middle aged man named Cyprian sat down in a North African garden in Carthage and wrote to his friend Donatus, and here’s what he said: “This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high roads, pirates on the seas, in the Roman amphitheaters men murdered to please applauding crowds, under too many roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. Yet in the midst of it I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians – and I am one of them.” (I wish you to be one of them too.)

(4) And this brings us to our 4th and final point – as Cyprian found his life’s most meaningful “serenity” in the community which shared his faith – so ought we and all Christians.

Rufus M. Jones, that great Quaker Professor of Philosophy at Haverford College and founder of the American Friends Service Committee, has reminded us that Christianity must not only express itself in “constructive outwardness” but must also be rooted in “spiritual inwardness.”

We Presbyterians are so likely to employ the “outwardness” of our faith – and neglect the “inwardness” – the quiet power of spiritual resources, meditation, that inspired the creed and enables the character – we fail to practice the real presence of our Lord.

Oh, we know all about God – or think we do – but forget to talk with him. We need not say with Job (Job 23:3): “Oh that I knew where I might find him.” For God is here. Our Lord Christ is here. “Lo I am with you.” Sometimes it’s just our hurry that keeps us from seeing him – “Be still, and know that I am God.” Sometimes it’s our sin that blinds us – “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they alone shall see God.” (Mt. 5:8) And sometimes we just don’t try to see him – “Ye shall seek me, and find me, only when ye shall search for me with all your heart.” (Jer. 29:13)

You know, to find God and talk with him is to find one's everlasting "cupful of quietness" – it is to find a serenity in which all of life can operate. Said Isaiah (28:16), "He that believeth shall not make haste." "For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy one of Israel; in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength." (Is. 30:15)

To possess this quietness of God's real presence does make a vast difference in the day.

In the morning – it is to awaken, not with the thought, "how can I get through another one?" – but with the prayer, "Thank you, God, for life and the gift of a clean new start."

"My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, Lord; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up." (Ps. 5:3) Starting the day like that – things will "look up" indeed! What calm joy and serenity is in the Psalmist's prayer – whose first words in the morning were: "When I awake, I am still with thee."

And if we begin each day with a "cupful of serenity", we can end it that way too. "I will both lay me down in peace and sleep: for thou, Lord, only makest me to dwell in safety." (Ps. 4:1) "He giveth his beloved sleep." (Ps. 127:2) "Come unto me ... and I will give you rest."

In the 4th century in Spain, a man named Prudentius wrote this poem entitled "Before Sleep":

“the toil of day is ebbing,
the quiet comes again,
in slumber deep relaxing,
the limbs of tired men.

and minds with anguish shaken
and spirits racked with grief
the cup of all forgetting
have drunk and found relief.

the still Letheon waters
now steal through every vein,
and men no more remember
the meaning of their pain.

let, let the weary body
lie sunk in slumber deep;
the heart shall still remember
Christ in its very sleep.”

Well, it's not the 4th century, but the 20th, yet with a handful (a heartful) of quiet faith like that – no one would need a handful of sleeping pills.

And between morning and evening? And throughout the day? “The peace of God ... shall keep your heart through Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:7)

In the original, that word “keep” is a Greek military word meaning “to stand guard.” At night after a day's campaign, when the soldiers were dead tired and needed a handful of quiet rest, they would take turns standing guard with locked shields around the camp, keeping watch, so that some could sleep behind this solid wall of protection.

In this same way, the “peace of God” which Christ brings can “stand guard” – can form a wall round about our lives – protecting us, keeping us, not from our responsibilities, not from our pain, but from the fears and tensions that would slip in to destroy our effectiveness, our ability to keep life up and keep it going.

I like this figure of Paul's – God's peace, standing guard, round about us, so that we may have our bit, our share, our “handful of quietness.”

You know, some of us have been so afraid of using our Christian faith pragmatically, for selfish ends, that we have committed the equally grievous error of not accepting its true benefits – God in Christ stands willing to give us so much – if we let him.

“Fear not little flock; it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.”

“My peace I give unto you.”

So let it be. Amen.

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