

## BEING THE RELIGIOUS

In the name of the Origin and Aim of Existence, in the name of the Possibility represented by life itself, and in the name of the Style of Free Responsibility.

I want to witness to experiencing and deciding to love the Trinity. This comes to me as Care for God, Care for the Self, and Care for Others.

### Care for God

This is deciding to love the Origin and Aim of our lives.

We encounter God as the limiter of our lives and this is most profoundly held for us in our death. Deciding to love this reality is to find a way to be attentive to our death.

The practice which holds this best for me is Fasting. A year ago three people at the Westside House did a ten day fast. They were attempting to overcome the non-challance and irrelevance into which our regular fasts had fallen. It struck me at the time that a ten day fast was something I would like to do myself at some point. Then last spring I became aware of how caught up and attached I was to my work. I had spent a month working on the USAID proposal that went right up to the final cut and was then rejected. I had spent a month working on a proposal to the World Bank which was ridiculous because they are not even in a position to receive proposals. And I had just finished spending a month and a half on an education research proposal to the Spencer Foundation. I told Ray Spencer that I thought if I got another rejection from Spencer Foundation, I might turn into a basket case. He made the remark that I had better prepare myself for a No. That really struck me, "to prepare yourself for a NO".

The afternoon I turned in the Spencer Foundation proposal, I stopped to have a drink and celebrate the expenditure. I suddenly realized that I hadn't eaten in twenty-four hours, what with all the final typing, etc. And I wasn't hungry. I decided at that point that my ten day fast had begun. That this was the way to prepare myself for the real possibility of a No from Spencer Foundation. I called the Westside and had Rich Shealy's books on fasting that they had used sent over. I had a fascinating time reading these very secular descriptions of and reasons for fasting.

What really addressed me in these books were some of the examples given for what happens to you if you aren't detached from food. They gave several descriptions of people who had been in plane wrecks or mountain climbing expeditions and been lost for days and weeks. In many cases, the groups resorted to cannibalism. In cases where people had decisionally fasted prior to their accident, they simply decided to fast on this occasion as well. I learned that most people can go on a liquid fast for about twenty-six days before their body is in any danger.

My own experience with the ten day fast is that it is very exhilarating. After the first two or three days, you really aren't hungry anymore and you begin to enjoy being detached from eating. You experience a tremendous sense of freedom and relaxation, as well as a deep affirmation of life. For someone like me, who is always 'up-tight' about everything, this is a rare experience indeed.

With Fasting, one experiences that Death is My Friend. It is not self-denial but a way of indicating your honor for and trust in the Ground of our Being.

You may think that only morbid persons contemplate their death and that you yourself are not conscious of your death. But we are all conscious of it in less dramatic ways, in the Nos that come into our lives.

I remember in the movie "The Shrike" that scene where the man goes to the cupboard and finds it empty. He says that it hit him that there were never again going to be any desserts in life. That's where he goes off his rocker and has to have psychiatric help. Or you remember the scene in "Requiem" where Mache says to Mountain, "You're not a winner any more. Let's make some money from the losing."

In the book, Clan of the Cave Bear, the heroine, Ayla is cursed by the clan. She is declared dead. She is there, but people ignore her, don't speak to her, literally don't see her. She is sent away and told that if she can survive on her own, she will be accepted back from the dead.

We all experience this kind of rejection, and these are a foretaste of our death. I think this often happens for us with a change of assignment. I remember when I was reassigned from the Philippines to Chicago. About twelve hours before plane time, I was stricken with appendicitis and had to go in for an emergency appendectomy. Immediately following the operation, Kendra and David left for the US. I stayed there while the new team came in to pick up final preparations for the ITI. What I experienced was not only the solitude of my life, but its irrelevance. The new team did not seek my advice regarding how to carry out their task. Once in a while they visited me in the Philippino home where I was staying, but basically they went about their work, as if I did not exist. They were not being cruel; they were being natural. I got very clear, that life can and will go on without you. You come and you go, but life just keeps on.

To decide to Care for God is to decide to find the exercises that allow you to be attentive to the final reality of our existence rather than to simply be involved at the surface of our lives.

Care for the Self

This is deciding to love the possibility represented by life itself and your life in particular.

Having encountered our death, yet being alive, we are confronted with the self as a relationship, as consciousness of existence and non-being. We discover that the self that each of us is, is a reality only to yourself and to the mystery. Our solitude teaches us that we alone are responsible for our lives. We find the need to pilot this self through life.

The practice which I believe enables this guidance is the solitary office. - the practice of meditation, contemplation, and prayer. It is in this arena that I have found the work of Ira Progoff most refreshing. I first became aware of Progoff's work when Carol Pierce gave me an article from Psychology Today. In this article, Progoff talks about how in the Victorian era of Freud, it was sex that was the great secret, the unmentioned subject. In our times, says Progoff, "spirituality is the awful secret". People are afraid to talk about it.

During my first ten day fast, I got the Daily Log exercise from Karen Troxel and began using it. What addressed me, and the reason I have continued to use it for several months, is its contentless non-moralistic method. There are no philosophical or religious presuppositions. No imposed content from someone else. The total content is your life experience. Yet the structure of the Daily Log, like the Journal it is a part of, is totally affirming. It is one of the first structures of absolution I have encountered.

More recently, I have begun working in Process Meditation. I find these practices force you to hold the tension between the Dark Face of God and the Light face of God; to reflect on both the experience of alienation and that of union or connection.

I think the power of books like Shogun, Taipan, and Noble House is that they present characters who are self-conscious and who use solitary exercises to guide them. You recall that the character in Noble House regularly dialogues with the first Taipan. The main character in Shike and The Last of the Zinja engages in regular meditation.

This has to do with the basic active/passive tension in life. When you are most active, you have the greatest need for means of detachment. In this regard, I have found the Progoff Mantra/Crystal Meditation to be very close to what we were trying to get at with the states of being of the Other World. We used to do visits to the Other World. This fall, when I went through some minor surgery, I experienced the power of having meditation exercises at your disposal.

This was one of those out-patient operations, where you go in, have the surgery, and leave. Sort of like going to the dentist. They use local anesthesia only, so you are totally aware of what's going on. You see them using the scizzors, you hear the skin being cut, you smell the cauterizing of blood veins. You listen to the conversation between the doctors. They are treating this like changing a tire, and you are wondering whether or not the damn thing is malignant. In the midst of all of this, I found myself meditating on a mantra which takes me to a state of peace and at-homeness. The operation was over before I knew it. Right in the midst of an obviously anxiety-producing situation, I was able to come to terms with either diagnosis. The fact that it was benign was secondary to being in charge of the self experiencing this situation.

To decide to care for the self is to find and then use those exercises of meditation, contemplation and prayer which allow you to stand present to your own acceptance as the self you are.

#### Care for Others

This is deciding to love being responsible for the world.

From the moment we become conscious, we are confronted with responsibility. At first we suspect that this is something someone is trying to impose on us. Later we discover that to be is to be in relationship. And relationship means responsibility.

I think practices in this arena have to do with space and appearance. Our earlier experiment with obediences was in this arena. A selection from Franny & Zooy comes to my mind. You remember the place where Seymour tells Franny, "Shine your shoes for the Fat Lady."? And Franny describes how she pictured this woman with fat, veiny legs sitting in a wicker chair on her porch listening to the radio while she is dying of cancer. Somehow this picture communicated to Franny why she had to shine her shoes everytime she went on the air even though no one would ever see them. It was a drama of telling the fat lady her life is received. It was a gesture of respect and honor.

When I first returned to the Kemper building, I found that there were a lot of people with the "housewife" syndromn. They wore their old clothes to the office and generally just didn't bother to shine their shoes. It struck me after a while that what they were communicating to each other was that what was going on wasn't all that important. It seemed to me that an important ritual there would be "wearing your suit to the office". Dressing in a way that honored the expenditure that was going on in the building on behalf of our work around the world. I find it makes a difference.

Each of us experiences "our own most personal responsibility" in different arenas. I know a couple of years ago I started pushing "The Five Great Talks". Then I was in the kitchen during the summer program these were worked on. Later when I read the ones that were done that summer, I was furious. They were the biggest pile of bullshit I had seen - a mixture of everything we had done

into a mess of moralistic imperatives for what the rest of the world should do. I was so angry, I sat down and began working on my own series on indicative ethics. Mine never went very far either.

This past year, the chauvinistic language of the Housechurch ritual really began to grate on me. I mean the one that was redone by the Academy that changed one or two words, but left all the patriarchial imagery intact. I experienced the inadequacy of this language as a personal ethical issue. I was unable to participate in most of the Housechurch. I stewed and fretted for some time. Then I remembered how Mathews used to push me and others. If we had a question, he would ask us for our model. And Joe had a great way of pushing the hell out of you and making you feel affirmed in the midst of it. I suppose that's why he became such a mentor for most of us.

You know, I'm a very irritating person. I know that. You know that. I have questions about everything. I always have. It used to drive my Dad to distraction. People often experience my questions as some kind of personal attack on them. They're not. But anyway, I can generate a lot of friction with my questions. And Joe was one of the few people I ever met whose first response to me wasn't "No!". So when I began having this ethical crisis over the language of Housechurch, I decided to have a dialogue with Joe.

In this dialogue we rehearsed an argument we had way back in 1963. I said I didn't think you had to use the Christian symbols to express the depths of life. That they could be replaced by something secular. Joe pushed me to prove it. So we came up with this artform RSI course that we did with youth all over the metropolitan area. With gangs like the 'Muscadoodler' as well as with church groups in the suburbs. I don't think we ever resolved our argument. But what stuck with me was that if you really believed in something, what you had to do was create a model and go out and test your assumptions.

This song sheet is the product of my dialogue with Joe about the Housechurch language. I decided that I couldn't just sit week after week in ethical agony, I had to start experimenting with language which more adequately expresses my understanding of life. I don't experience God as Father. Father for me means punishment. From as long as I can remember, I was always being punished by my Dad. At first it was just for being the third girl instead of a boy, later it was for all my questions and obviously contrary ideas. Punishment is not my understanding of God. God is the limiter of my life, but not a punisher. Moreover, God is that which sustains and affirms my life as well. The Mystery, Origin and Aim, Ground of Being come much closer to my understanding of God than father ever will.

This song sheet is the product of my own most personal sense of responsibility. History requires something new in the arena of religious language. There is no point in sitting around and waiting for someone else to come up with it. Someone has to start sometime.

To decide to care for others is to decide to take responsibility for them and for the future out of your own most personal sense of what is real and important.

All of this, Care for God, Care for the Self, and Care for Others it seems to me is what it means to be a person of integrity, to be the Religious in our times.

In the name of the Origin and Aim of Existence, in the name of the Possibility represented by life itself, in the name of the Style of Free Responsibility.

DOXOLOGY

Tune: Jamaica Farewell

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,  
Praise God all creatures here below,  
Praise God above ye heavenly host,  
Praise Spirit, Word and Creator.

Chorus:

Amen. Amen. Amen.  
Amen. Amen. Amen.  
Amen. Amen. Amen.

PRAISE TO BEING

O God, open Thou our lips,  
O God, open Thou our lips,  
And our mouths shall show forth  
Shall show forth Thy praise,  
Shall show forth Thy praise.

Praise to the One  
Praise to the One  
God's name be praised.  
God's name be praised.  
God's name be praised.

Let each one announce the Word.  
Let each one announce the Word.  
My life is pleasing  
Oh yes, my life is pleasing,  
Oh yes, my life is pleasing to the One.

PSALM 117

Praise to God all nations!  
Extoll God, all peoples!  
For great is God's kindness toward us;  
And God's mercy toward us is everlasting!

*Donna McCleskey*