

What Stops Us?

By Janet Council

Sermon of May 28, 2006 to The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

Readings:

Psalm 90 translated by Stephen Mitchell

Galatians 6: 9,10

When Reverend Rachel asked me to deliver the spiritual message today I immediately said "yes," even though at the time I had more on my plate than I was managing graciously. I said "yes" because I knew from prior experience that it was something I needed to do to re-center myself.

When I go off course, committing to a thoughtful process of reading and writing has always been restorative for me. It elevates my thoughts and usually gives me the necessary attitude adjustment.

Today, one of the things I wanted to talk about is what most needs adjusting in me presently ... doing my work mindfully and joyfully. Swedenborg calls for us to be of use in our world. What stops us from doing the best that we can all of the time? I will be sharing some of my personal obstacles to living a life of use and I will share my goal with you later.

I would also like to tell you about a movie that several of us viewed in the parish house. It was "Shining Soul," about the life of fellow Swedenborgian Helen Keller. I was moved to tears by her bravery, her commitment, her radical enlightenment, her luminosity and her life of usefulness. I thought her a fitting subject for a Memorial Day sermon as well as an inspiration for all of us. Given her numerous physical limitations, what stops the rest of us from impacting our world a FRACTION of the way she impacted hers?

First, a little about what stops me. I am sometimes anxious and agitated, and if I don't heed those warning signs, I end up crabby and overwhelmed, and if I don't heed those warning signs, I get depressed...all fueled by feelings of inadequacy. After what I thought was careful planning and a reorganization of my life over the last year, I found myself once again in overly scheduled chaos.

When I'm anxious and overwhelmed it's unhealthy for me, and of course it's annoying and off putting for those around me. I know what I NEED to do. I need down time, meditation, exercise, playtime, inspiration and church. But the church part of that equation, which had become the most important part to me over those first years, had turned into what seemed more like work than sustenance. Truthfully, I was resenting it.

When I started attending this church over 7 years ago I received. I had my Ph.D. in receiving. I basked in the glow of Rachel's and Jim's sermons, I cried at just about everything the choir sang, I relished the beauty that surrounded me...I loved it ALL...and I still do. Swedenborg tells us that we are to be vessels of God's enduring love. I had forgotten that by definition a vessel holds **and** pours. I was holding...holding on tightly to the best feelings I had ever known. I was receiving love in my vessel, but I was keeping the love in my vessel for me. I took and took, drank thirstily of the permission granted to be me in this church, the understanding I felt, the connection with fellow parishioners was wonderful. Yes, it felt great, I was appreciative, and I held onto it with a sense of entitlement -- and I called it spirituality.

That first year I was asked to greet on the first Sunday of each month and I thought "why not?" good way to meet folks and be of service. After all that I had received in Sunday services, Wednesday night classes and church retreats, I was being asked to give a little by serving the church. I could do that once a month...an extra hour of my time - I was here anyway...sure

Three years later I was asked to consider nomination to the church council. I said yes. The first few months were wonderful examples of how a meeting could take care of business and be spiritually collaborative. I served as secretary pro temp for six months out of that first year, and I was elected to serve as secretary the following two years of my term. Another task to learn -- another way to be of service -- a few more hours each month...OK.

A few months into that term difficult church administrative decisions had to be made. There were divisions in my sacred space, disagreements, some drama, and all of a sudden my spiritual home was not a place in which I was *able* to rest and renew myself. There were also many extra meetings. I hadn't signed on for that. Church became more like a job that I didn't like than the spiritual home it had been. After deep consideration I decided I would attempt to be a part of a solution...blind faith. I was in uncharted waters. It was scary and I was acting "as if." "As if" I believed that everything was going to be just fine. I, of course, wasn't sure of that then, but acting "as if" would serve me eventually. I was judging my church experience by how it was benefiting me. I was expecting my religion to fit my lifestyle instead of living my religion.

I was elected to another three year term on the council last November, but stepped down from the position of secretary. I would have more time, less stress right? Not quite. Almost two years ago I had accepted the chair position of the newly formed Hospitality Committee which needed twenty-five members. I found myself in another time consuming activity. Again, how was I to be of use joyfully when I just felt overwhelmed by the task before me? Now Sunday really did feel like work. This "more work to do than time to do it in" mentality was the reason I had sought out a meditation school some 10 years ago...and why I had continued to come to this church ... to carve out time for myself to reconnect with what was really important, and to calm myself. and here I was again -- running around like a crazy woman. IN CHURCH...what was wrong with this picture?

The mission for the Hospitality Committee each Sunday morning is to ensure that the sanctuary is prepared for worship, that there is a warm welcoming face greeting arriving worshipers, that communion is prepared on the first Sunday of each month, and that coffee hour is set up for our enjoyment after service. I wanted Rachel to rest assured that all would be taken care of each Sunday so that she could focus on her liturgy and sermon and her calling as our minister. In retrospect I should have put an addendum in the mission statement that we would relieve her stress without stressing myself or anyone else out. I was doing good badly.

Which brings me to my goal that I promised to share with you earlier. I want to shift my focus from how the task at hand keeps me from doing what *I want to do*, to doing what needs to be done with devotion... I hope eventually to find the joy in that...offering others the experience that was given me.

So I find myself at yet another stage of spiritual growth. I am finally moving on from resenting my perceived loss of Sunday spiritual renewal. I was defining "renewal" as the receiving of what was so beautifully offered me each Sunday morning. Now I pray to be moving into spiritual renewal by giving that meaningful experience to others. I can do that by contributing to making this church as warm and welcoming for someone else's Sunday as it always was for mine. I have basked in the love, and the joy, and the peace that this church afforded me ... it is time to give back and to do that gracefully. What I admired about the grace filled way in which Helen Keller gave, I was not seeing in myself.

Which brings us to the life and good works of Helen Keller. Let's see what we might learn from her example. What I knew of Helen Keller was the indelible impression that the movie *The Miracle Worker* made on me decades ago...that wildcat of a girl and her gifted teacher. Watching *Shining Soul* was another experience altogether. I was seeing actual footage of her as an adult...what a smile she had-what a glow -- what a beatific presence. I wanted some of what she had as she navigated the course of her physical disabilities to give and give to her world.

She was born a normal hearing, sighted baby in Alabama in 1880. What disease struck her at 19 months remains a mystery, perhaps scarlet fever, encephalitis or meningitis, but when the fever broke she was left deaf, blind, and mute. When Helen was almost seven, her teacher, Annie Sullivan, came into her life...the miracle worker. About a month into their relationship Helen had a breakthrough at the family water pump. She understood the connection between the water that she felt and the word 'water' being spelled into her hand. She later wrote "all at once there was a strange stir within me -- a misty consciousness, a sense of something remembered. It was as if I had come back to life after being dead. That first revelation was worth all those years I had spent in dark, soundless imprisonment. That word 'water' dropped into my mind like the sun in a frozen winter world."

She began inquiring about God and Jesus and once while visiting Boston, Annie took her to Trinity Church to meet the rector so that she could ask him her questions. Helen said Bishop Brooks understood the heart of a child and explained all to her in such a way that from that day forward she felt Jesus' life deepening down into her own, and she found more and more to be glad of in the world. When she was twelve, she had an out of body experience. She went to Athens, Greece (a place she had never been), without leaving the room in which she had been sitting quietly. It was then that she realized that "space was nothing to spirit." It was that realization that broke her minds eye through her physical limitations.

She still had problems reconciling the vengeful wrathful God of the Old Testament with the loving Jesus of the New Testament. When she was 13 she met John Hitz, a Swedenborgian scholar who was to become her spiritual mentor. For years he copied books into Braille and mailed them to her. He gave her Swedenborg's best seller, Heaven and Hell. As she read she said she felt God as close to her as she had when Bishop Brooks had told her about Christ in Trinity Church. "Gradually I came to see that I could use the Bible, which had so baffled me, as an instrument for digging out precious truths, just as I could use my hindered, halting body for the high behest's of my spirit"

Helen Keller was a hero and icon of the 20th century. In 1904 she graduated Radcliff summa cum laude. She was fluent in five languages. She wrote seven books, poetry, literary essays, and political commentary. To earn a living for herself and Annie she toured and lectured for five years and took to the vaudeville stage to tell her story. In 1924 she went to work for the American Foundation for the Blind, a position she held for 44 years. Her work influenced legislation for a unified Braille code and her advocacy for talking books resulted in the blind being able to hear the written word. She traveled the world and visited 39 countries. She was known and admired by the great and famous of her time and met every president from Coolidge to Kennedy. She was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She counted among her friends Alexander Graham Bell and Mark Twain. She died in 1968 at 88, an inspiration to millions.

Some said that Helen Keller was the most totally alive human being they ever met. She had intense empathy and interest in her world. It was through Swedenborg that she awakened to spirit. His recurrent themes of useful service and sharing joy with others resonated with Helen. For Swedenborg says that we are in heaven when we think a noble thought and we stay there when it is our HAPPINESS to serve others. He says that the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of useful service.

It was said that Helen was positive and full of good will and that her house was full of joy, laughter and good conversation. She thanked God for her handicaps because through them she found herself, her work and her God. She transformed her suffering into a force for good. When she wasn't allowed to marry, she again reconciled herself to her fate, and directed the force of her heart energy to difficult tasks and the service of those less fortunate. She was an idealist and a social activist. She fought for women's suffrage, racial equality, peace, civil rights -- always committed to the public good and doing good for its own sake. She said in every moment we have a choice -- choose life -- for to choose is to create. Understanding her life is understanding her faith.

She believed that true happiness could only be attained if it benefited the world. Once asked why she was so happy she answered "life in all its moments is so full of glory." She believed that despite any adversity you can contribute to society and fulfill your dreams. She always faced her problems and never let them master her. She said "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. What you are born with is finite, what you do with it is limitless." She felt the presence of God in the ordinary.

It has been said that perhaps her greatest gift was her presence. For many, meeting Helen Keller was like having a religious experience, an encounter with an angel. Almost invariably people were moved to tears.

She reminded us be grateful for what we have. To serve others with joy, for the sake of their happiness, with no thought of reward, simply out of love. She urged us to do something that goes beyond the expected, the reasonable, the acceptable. She would encourage us to engage in a ministry of accompaniment. To take risks emotionally, politically, socially, and religiously on the behalf of others. The wellness and wholeness of our fellow human beings brings us rest. Instead of focusing on changing the lives of others, look at ways we can change our own life on their behalf

Selfishness and a closed heart can stop us. As Rev. Rachel has pointed out, if we are in denial or escapism, if we are scapegoating or being cynical, we are being selfish and our hearts are closed.

I invite you to consider what stops you. Just notice. Please don't chastise yourself. Just observe. Our theology gives us guidelines for our spiritual journey

Last week Rev. Rachel's sermon was titled "Portals of Joy." She said that through gratitude, play, and wanting joy for others, we attain joy for ourselves. Swedenborg says that God's true church is within each of us. He defines sin as not being the best that we can be. We are the image of the whole, of all there is. Uses point heavenward. They involve reaching out...an expansion. By putting God first, our neighbor second, and the world third, we have a choice in every moment to keep our heart open and do for others. If we combine what we enjoy with what needs doing, and start with trying to do good, then good will be done through us.

Two questions you might want to ask yourself...Is it my goal to be happy and have a life of peace and purposeful accomplishments? How does what I am doing now contribute to that end?

I would like to close with some of Wilson Van Dusen's words on usefulness. Use is a way of considering the design, function and purpose of everything. Use lies in concrete acts...words are unnecessary. The immediacy of useful action takes us out of ourselves into circumstances toward others and a larger world. In being useful, one is attempting to do whatever is at hand very well as a way of reaching out and learning. It is a way of practicing devotion in any work or activity. What hasn't been noticed is a subtle, fast and consistent divine response in one's inner awareness? This divine guidance takes several forms. The complex dynamics of this guidance perfect how one works, correct personal habits and faults, and then lead into general perceptions of the nature of reality. Should you get into this process, you will see that it is powerful and comprehensive enough that no other method of spiritual development is ever needed.

The greatest wonder of uses will be discovered when you come into your highest uses. Then the deepest loves can be expressed and heaven becomes very obvious.