

John L. Titus May 6, 2012
San Francisco Swedenborgian Church

We read from the Psalms that “God is our strength, a very present help in trouble”. It goes on to say, “Be still, and know that I am God”. I am reminded of a time years ago, when my children were still at home, I was running after work as I did most every day. Running for me is a time of moving meditation and reflection. It helps me work all of the pent up emotions out of my system and relax. As I was running out in the country I went by an old church. On the marquis was the Bible quote, “Be still and know that I am God”. The profundity of this simple truth really struck me and stayed with me over the years. It serves as a reminder that all we have to do is still our ego minds, stop all of that monkey-chatter that longs to drive us crazy, and allow God’s presence to manifest. Since then I have consciously made an effort to learn to “still my mind” and find God’s peace. Although this has been tested to the extreme, I still find it to be true.

Most of you know my dear friend Reverend Eric Allison. Eric and I went to Urbana University together for a couple of years during the days of Dr. Dorothea Harvey. She was a professor and local minister of the Swedenborgian Church, a special friend and mentor. Over the years Eric, and I have become very good friends; we have travelled together, played together, prayed together and commiserated together. As some of you know, Eric had a stroke a few years back; he’s a year younger than me, so relatively speaking, he’s fairly young to have a stroke. The stroke destroyed much of his left hemisphere, a section about the size of a grapefruit. Consequently, Eric has had to learn how to function almost entirely in the right hemisphere, or as I like to call it, the “right mind”. The left brain is where the ego resides; this is where we make decisions based on logic as we critically analyze situations and come to conclusions. The right mind is our creative side; more importantly, it is where we feel the interconnection with all of life, with each other and with God. In our society, we have placed a high premium on the left brain and devalued the right brain. In her book, “My Stroke of Insight”, Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a brain specialist who had a stroke and was able to overcome many of the devastating effects and return to her work, states that when her left brain

was flooded with blood from an aneurism and she was entirely in the right brain, she could feel other people's energy as her own boundaries dissipated. She said that she felt a sense of oneness with all of life and with God; and she felt this incredible sense of nirvana or heaven. Her message now as she travels around talking about this is that we all have this capability to connect with God and to feel this deep sense of peace; all we have to do is learn how to slow the left brain and allow the right mind to take us there.

As we read from Emmanuel Swedenborg, "In proportion as anyone is in the stream of Providence, he is in a state of peace; and also in proportion as anyone is in a state of peace from the good of faith, he is in the Divine Providence." He goes on to say that, "When man is in a state of peace, he is then lead by the Lord by means of good". Conversely, he states that, "If man were then to lead himself, even if it were by means of truth, he would dissipate the state of peace; and there would consequently be no conjunction."

As many of you know Bev and I visited your church in January of this year. We were on a book tour promoting the book I published last August entitled, "Losing Alicia: A Father's Journey After 9/11". In the book I write about my own personal journey of losing a child to murder in a highly politicized and religiously divided environment. By some religious extremists' thinking, this was seen as another Crusade. I attempted to document my story of loss and grief in the midst of all the chaos that abounded. Wars were started as a consequence of Alicia's murder (and all the others who were murdered that day). Early on, the media hounded us constantly. I remember an interview with a Detroit television station prior to the invasion of Afghanistan in which the journalist asked me what I thought of the impending invasion of Afghanistan. Even in the midst of all the pain and grief, my prayers were being answered. I felt that I was being led by the Lord by "means of good". I stated that if by waging war more innocent people like Alicia were going to die, then I was totally opposed to it. I said that most of the people of Afghanistan had nothing to do with the attack of September 11th. I also stated that those responsible should be brought to justice in an international court of law for the whole world to see what justice looked like. Throughout my grief journey it became abundantly clear that using violence to counteract violence

only increased violence; and that this was not the path to peaceful coexistence. I read a quote by Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. that spoke so eloquently to this. In it he says, **“Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars... Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”**

An inner peace was beginning to find its way into my soul, even as the ravages of war became more pronounced all around me. America seemed to be blind with rage; reason seemed to have been replaced with fear. Thus, I began to use my unique platform to speak out against the idea that violence can somehow bring about peace and justice.

And, speak out I did! At first I read everything I could about the attack of 9/11, terrorism, politics, injustice, war and peace, life and death. I wrote newspaper and magazine articles, interviewed with television, radio and newspaper journalists and then began speaking at different venues to include churches, universities, high schools, public forums and political gatherings. We started a Fund at Urbana University entitled The Alicia Titus Memorial Peace Fund and developed programs through Alicia’s Fund to bring about a greater awareness of the realities of violence and war. We joined with the organization, September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, who had established connections with other peace organizations, victims of violence, advocacy groups and individuals all over the world who were working on peaceful solutions to our social ills.

Our “Peaceful Tomorrows” group became our “best friends we never wanted to know” as we worked together, cried together and prayed together. We were networking with victims of political violence, families of war casualties and oppressed people from all over the world. We consistently attempted to have our voices heard at all levels of the government and across the media both locally and internationally. We wrote to and met with congressmen and marched at the front of protest marches against the wars, some of which were a million people strong. But, the voice of these Americans was intentionally being suppressed.

Bev and I felt very strongly in what we were doing. At all levels, it felt like the right thing to do. We had found our voices and we were now the voice for our

deceased daughter. I was invited to the Department of Peace Conference in Washington D.C. and did the Sunday morning service alongside Marianne Williamson, afterwards we presented the DOP Bill to a Congressional Committee. Using Alicia's Fund we developed programs for nonviolent conflict mediation, hosted other peace activities and invited a Muslim teacher, Nesreen from Baghdad to talk about her life before and after the U.S. occupation. Bev and I were invited to Italy, spoke at local secondary schools, met with media and keynoted at the Alleati per la Pace (National Peace Alliance) Conference in Riccione, Italy. Both Bev and I were invited to talk at the American Muslim Voice Conference near Palo Alto, California. We continued to share our story in churches and classrooms throughout the United States and spoke at major universities and small colleges as we concerted our efforts with veterans groups, peace organizations, faith communities, including the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice, met with politicians, journalists and to anyone who would listen. Always, Bev was at my side doing her fair share.

Along our journey, we have been heckled, threatened and told that our daughter deserved to die because we refused to support the war. Oh, I distinguished between the politicians who led us into war from the soldiers who bravely risked their lives for our country, but I could not get behind the needless killing of innocent civilians, a direct result of war, who now make up over 80% of the total deaths from war. Robert McNamara, one of the orchestrators of the Vietnam War who later declared it as a major mistake, in his book "Wilson's Ghost" estimated that in the 20th Century, there were 160 million deaths as a result of war; 120 million were civilian casualties. He goes on to say that in this century the estimates are more than twice that for civilian loss. Our tax dollars support this atrocity at the expense of our country's fiscal wellbeing! The reason I am so passionate about this is that my daughter was a casualty of war, a victim of political violence!

We are told in the Bible to "love our enemies"; but how is that possible? How could I possibly love those who murdered my daughter? As I continued to pray and meditate while letting go of my ego-driven left brain, I began to see that we are all deeply interconnected in ways that we can't fully comprehend. I wrote an

article about this during the Christmas Season of 2001. As I was trying to find a sense of peace visualizing the birth and life of Jesus, while all around me and inside of me the devastations of war were ever-present, I had this profound sensation and insight. I experienced the interconnection with other human beings and all of life. The “boundaries” of my separate self dissipated and I could see clearly that we are interdependent and interconnected, much like the cells of the body. I wrote that, like the cells of the body that rely on one another for optimal functioning of the whole, we humans are very much like these cells. And, not unlike how we approach the disease of cancer, in which we wage war on the bad cells, killing good cells in the process, this is how we approach the resolution of conflict. The problem with this approach is that many good cells (good people) die in the process. My daughter was one of the good cells as were hundreds of thousands of Afghanis and Iraqis who have died as a result of our war.

I began to see that each of us has both good and evil within us and it is by the Grace of God and our own free will that we are following a higher calling which allows us to choose good over evil. Most of us are neither completely “good” nor totally “evil”, we have elements of both; but, I would venture to say that most of us here strive to do good, which comes from God through Divine Providence. And, yet we find ourselves struggling with other forces through temptation.

Swedenborg says that regeneration comes from overcoming temptation. In our daily lives, we choose a path of righteousness or a path of evil. The ego mind often leads us astray in an attempt to dominate and control; but, Divine Providence is always leading us toward peace, love, compassion, understanding and usefulness. Like the old Native American proverb in which the old Grandfather is talking with his grandson and says: Grandson, in our hearts there is a battle raging between and good wolf and a bad wolf. The little boy says, “but grandfather, which one will win”? The one you choose, grandson.

In my career, I have worked with troubled youth in both residential and outpatient settings. I have also taught in prisons and worked with inmates in other capacities. I have witnessed this battle that rages on within the soul through these troubled youth and in my own soul. In my own struggle, I have always felt the presence of God guiding me, giving me hope, filling my heart with love and

compassion and willing me to a higher place. Many of these youth did not have that. I also had the undying love of family and friends that I could always count on; most of these youth did not. Even though some of these youth would go on to commit murders and violent crimes, I could still see the presence of God within them during times of vulnerability and distress. And, I was able to feel love and compassion for these young, but disturbed people, even though they could, in later years, be labeled as my “enemies” had they committed a crime against my family. I realized that we are all “children of God”, made by God and that His presence is in each of us. This presence, I could love unconditionally. As Dr. Martin Luther King stated about violence, the only way to overcome this violence is through love.

The other breakthrough for me was on the idea of forgiveness. How could I ever forgive those who killed my daughter? And, what does forgiveness really entail? I asked several scholars and theologians what forgiveness was, I read about it and I was involved in a study on forgiveness by a doctoral student. At Alicia’s Memorial Service less than a week after her death, I stood in front of several hundred people and repeated the words of Jesus while on the cross, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do”. This had come to me while preparing my talk, but I wasn’t ready to forgive just yet. However, the seeds of forgiveness were planted and, as I went about the country and world speaking on peace and justice issues, I realized that in order to heal and to allow joy to return to my heart, I must learn to forgive. I realized to “for-give” is really about giving forth to God those feelings of anger, hatred, fear, animosity and ill will that would surely destroy me if I continued to harbor them. By giving forth those feelings to God, I was able to feel an even greater joy, a deeper sense of peace, and a more profound sense of love in my heart. I did not have to carry the burden of hate and the need for revenge. I could now focus on compassion, justice and the return of love.

Alicia has been called an “old soul” by many who knew her. She was very wise and deeply compassionate in all that she did. Her soul was in a place of peace and she emanated this in all that she did. Her joy was greater than most people can even imagine. She felt the interconnection with all of life and cherished the differences

that make us unique. She saw diversity as a beautiful tapestry that when woven together made the whole so much more striking. Her heart was filled with love for the other and it was said that she would light up a room by her mere presence. She graced our lives for 28 years and 3 months; but she still fills my heart with her angelic presence. Throughout my journey of grief, she has blessed us with her soulful presence and affirmed the work that we are doing. I sometimes falter and feel weary in my efforts and then, I realize that: "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble." This has comforted my soul and given me courage in times of weakness and vulnerability. I know that in order to feel a deep sense of peace I must remain in "the stream of providence"; and I also realize that to remain in a state of peace from the good of faith, I am in the Divine Providence.

Our grief has been a difficult and painful journey. And, I know that the journey will never really be over. Losing a child is heart-wrenching and fraught with pain and desolation. At times, the sadness is greater than the heart can take. I find great comfort in my faith that has sustained me through these troubled times and for the love that fills my heart. My wife, Bev, my entire family and my loving friends have helped tremendously along the way. I truly feel blessed by all the good that has come my way since Alicia's death; for the return of joy, the deep abiding sense of peace, for greater understanding and for the love that fills my heart. Hope does run eternal; but only if we have faith and only if we allow ourselves to get into our right minds. Spend a little time with Eric Allison and he'll show how to get there.

Go in peace my friends and may God's love and light fill your souls. Thank you.