

What Cost Freedom?

Love is our life, our very life, the opening words of Swedenborg's *Divine Love & Wisdom*. Love is what informs and enlivens us. And yet, do we know what love actually is, what we actually are?

Reverend Junchol asked a very pertinent question to us last week, "What do you want? What do you really want?"

Our every intention, our every thought, our every word, our every action derives from our ruling love, from what we actually, truly love... Not from that which we would wish ourselves to love, not from what we would fancy that we love, not from what we would imagine that we love, but from that which we actually, really love...

What do you really want? What do you actually love?

Reverend Junchol also spoke to our potential as human beings, beings in the image of God. Beings of volition and discernment, beings of Love and Wisdom...

Today, I too want to speak to our potential, to the possibilities of our regeneration, our evolution, our movement from Human Beings in quotation marks to the Human Being that we could be.

We are all born natural, unregenerate beings with the same possibilities. One could say that in the beginning we are composed of four major categories of love: Love of Self, Love of the World, Love of the Other, Love of the Lord. And generally speaking, these loves are found in this order, in this priority, ourselves first and the Lord last. And as they are in our beginnings, these loves can generally be seen as egoistic loves.

What this life asks of us, what this life offers us, is the possibility for a re-ordering of these loves... To have the Lord, to have that which is heavenly and celestial first, to put the other second (and in loving the other, we again love the Lord), followed by the things of the world, and lastly by ourselves. And with this re-ordering, these loves naturally become more objective, less egoistic loves....

So here we are. And "there" we "might" want to be. But how? We can only make "our own," we can only transform our ruling loves, by that which we understand with our discernment, our discernment as it actually is, and by that which appeals to and delights us, by that which is in accordance with what we actually love.

And as we are, most of us and our fellows find our character traits, our foibles, our challenges, even our pathologies, endearing and interesting. We are charmed and enchanted by them. And they are the vehicle through which we know and define ourselves. And yet, they may be exactly what need be sacrificed, to be given up, to die to. Moreover, not only is it not possible to know in advance what we might evolve into, what we might become, but we may seemingly not like what we imagine this to be. We may even fear it...

I like to imagine myself as an infinitely sized amorphous sphere, from the inmost, below and beyond the molecular, the physical, from that which actually situates all that we perceive, out to the limits of the universe. And that which we keep closest to center are our ruling loves, and that which is further and further out are the things which have less and less effect upon us. The project ahead of us, our lives, is to bring what is good and true inward to our ruling places, and to move what is not good and the false outward to a place where it has less and less effect upon us.

And for everything that we want to bring in closer, we have to make room for, we have to sacrifice something, pay something...

What is required? How is this done? Who or what does it? What do I really want? What do I really love? What cost love? What cost freedom?

It never ceases to amaze me how each time I sit down to put a message, an inspiration, to paper, how it always morphs into something different, something new. At its onset, the inspiration for this message was to explore the personal cost of several practices that can lead us to a personal & spiritual freedom. But as this message developed, I found that in a simple listing of the practices, as opposed to a detailed description of each, that as much or more is revealed about their costs, both explicitly and implicitly.

Before reading this list, let me say again that these practices, these “ideals” are being explored as vehicles for becoming what we could be, for reaching our potential, not in some vain striving for perfection... Personally, I experience the opposite of all these ideals on a regular basis; and I experience a natural resistance to actually practicing them. But at the same time, in cultivating these and other practices, I can genuinely say that I have become more interested in and motivated by the practices themselves than in their costs...

Remember, these are practices, not ideas, not theories, not things to ponder and think about, now or in life, but things to do, to try to do, all the time knowing that though we may be acting as though we are doing them, we continually pray in the knowledge that it is actually the Lord that does the doing...

THE LIST

- 1. The Practice of Meditation and Mindfulness**
- 2. The Practice of Studying Wisdom & Truth, Scripture, The Living Word**
- 3. The Practice of Listening – To Ourselves , to Others, to our Environment**
- 4. The Practice of Prayer**
- 5. The Practice of Repentance, of spiritualizing of our thinking**
- 6. The Practice of taking Comfort in the Law – in Divine Providence**
- 7. The Practice of Silence**
- 8. The Practice of Sacrificing our Suffering**
- 9. The Practice of Accepting our Remorse - and of letting go of our guilt**
- 10. The Practice of a Grateful Attitude - and not expressing negativity, either inwardly or outwardly**
- 11. The Practice of Forgiveness – of Turning the Other Cheek**
- 12. The Practice of Single-Tasking - of giving our attention fully to whatever is actually in front of us...**
- 13. The Practice of Simplifying our Lives...**
- 14. The Practice(s) of: Patience, Relaxation, Submission, Obedience, Attending, Awaiting, of Letting Go, of Following Rules**
- 15. The Practice of Sacrificing our Uniqueness and Embracing Our Universality, our Lawfulness**
- 16. The Practice of Embracing the Cost(s) of these Practices**

Yes, many possible costs become quite clear: time, effort, vigilance, commitment, sincerity, priorities... and more... And these costs are very real practical ones, mostly unavoidable for real growth and progress... Real change does not occur by osmosis... So, how could real change actually occur? Who or what effects it? What is our part, including and beyond the costs, the sacrifices just mentioned?

Though I tried to list them in the order of their fundamental importance, as I have learned and experienced them, no single one of them is a magic bullet. They all, these and others, work in concert with one another, support one another, and each demand the same practical payments just mentioned.

And each of them also demands something of our “self” as we know ourselves, something of our humanness in quotations...

I am fairly sure that it is becoming quite clear that today’s message is about the difficult things, the hard things, the payment required, the sacrifices demanded... Here in this sacred space, as well as in many others, we often hear of the loving, tender, beautiful side of Divine Love and Wisdom, and this touches us all. But today I intentionally mean to address the other side of the coin, the other end of the stick...

And here's why... Let me try and share with you just how and why this "harder" side of things has become just as beautiful, just as tender, just as touching, and just as loving and wise as the "softer" side of the stick.

As many of you know, I struggled with alcoholism for most of my young adult life, and with intravenous drug use for the last ten years of my struggles. And, as I neglected to add in the first several drafts of this message, on August 9, one day at a time, I will have nine years clean and sober.

One of the main lessons that I learned is that my inability, my refusal to pay some or most of these costs, was not only killing me spiritually, but killing me literally, physically as well... I learned without the shadow of a doubt that my "way of being", a way of being that was eventually changed by these very practices, was killing me... And this is the great discovery of alcoholics and addicts who find recovery, one that they are eternally grateful for.

And a corollary to this discovery is that even if my way of being, my various character traits and selves, my foibles, had not led me to the acute crisis of full alcoholism and addiction that they did, they would have nevertheless led me to a long slow death, to a life of quiet mediocrity... They would have killed me spiritually all the same...

This morning I would like to expand on only two of the practices, Sacrificing our Suffering, and Embracing the Costs.

Sacrificing our Suffering. In contemplating this life changing practice, I have found that most of the previous 7 practices on the list are involved and support this practice...

What would be the costs of sacrificing our suffering? The costs would be our resentments, our judgments, our negativity, our anger, our fears, our desires, our concepts and ideas about justice and injustice, fairness, righteousness, and more... No mean task...

How do we see and take advantage of an opportunity to sacrifice our suffering?

Practice Meditation & Mindfulness: Through meditation and mindfulness practices, not only can we cultivate a more stable background against which to see ourselves and identify unnecessary suffering, but we also cultivate an ongoing interest and ability for looking within, in seeing ourselves, and our imaginary suffering.

Practice Studying Wisdom & Truth: With a practice of mindfully studying Wisdom and Truth, not just reading it, but mindfully and with feeling, giving it of our time and revelation, we begin to learn of another way. We begin to learn of the illusory nature of our suffering.

Practice Prayer: And again, with a mindful and meditative intensity, we begin a practice of prayer that incorporates the wisdom and truth we have studied into our hopes and wishes for ourselves, and into our hearts, our volition. Two scriptures that point to how and what to pray for:

From Today's scripture, John 14: 12-14, 21

I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

Matthew 6:19-21

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

A practice of prayer for things in “The Lord’s Name,” in accordance with the Lord’s ways and commandments... As Swedenborg puts it, for things heavenly and celestial... A practice of prayer that stores up treasures in heaven and situates our heart there, and if this does not seem altogether genuine or possible, then a prayer and a wish that it become so. As James Fowler says in his book “Stages of Faith,” and I paraphrase, “Faith is the myth or story that you want to become your life.” Pray this myth, this new story. It is a story with a different suffering and the wisdom to deal our unnecessary suffering.

Practice Repentance: A practice of Repentance, of changing our thinking, of spiritualizing our thinking... Through a mindful and meditative study of the Word and listening, through a practice of prayer which makes more genuine our efforts, a new way of thinking grows and arises, eventually even when in extremis, when we are disturbed, when we are suffering unnecessarily, we can have an idea with some force, an idea that might help.

Practice Taking Comfort in Divine Providence: And through this new way of thinking, a genuine belief, a knowing, in and of Divine Providence grows, a knowing that all is lawful, that things are not personal... That the Lord is working in all things for the ultimate and eternal good, something we may never see, and yet may “come to know.”

Practice Silence: Through the mindful and prayerful practice of silence, one of the greatest of all prayers, we practice sacrificing the myriad aspects of our potentially unhelpful thinking, our stories, all of our stories, and in doing so we starve the beast and enweaken the force of our suffering even before it arises...

Some words on Suffering from Jeanne De Salzmann (The Reality of Being) of the Gurdjieff tradition:

The question is, can you do something or not? If you can, you can, but if you cannot, it is another thing. If we begin suffering about everything we cannot help, then we shall certainly never cease suffering. The chief thing is to find how much imagination there is in it. We may be perfectly sure there is none, but if we make one more effort we often see that it is all imaginary. We have a wrong picture of ourselves, and at the same time we ascribe to this wrong picture real features. But if this picture is false, then everything about it is bound to be false, and its suffering is also false. It may be very acute, but this does not make any difference. Imaginary suffering is generally more unpleasant than real, because with real suffering you can do something, but with imaginary suffering you can do nothing. You can only get rid of it, but if you are fond of it or proud of it, then you have to keep it.

And last but not least, the **Practice of Embracing the Costs of These Practices...** In today’s world, there is a strong persuasion not to do anything that we don’t personally like. And we generally don’t like to pay. Of course, I am not suggesting that we continue to follow any practices the genuinely don’t work, practices that may harm us, but it is a very helpful practice to investigate the subtle difference between what we simply and personally don’t like and that which does not work. There is an ancient aphorism that is applicable here, a practice of “liking what it does not like.” “It” might be the part of us that resists growth, which resists spiritual regeneration...

My experience with The Word, especially with Old Testament scripture, could be a good example of “liking what it doesn’t like.” Although the Old Testament can seemingly be off putting and discouraging with its archaic, hammer wielding dictates and threats, this is not how I find it today. When I read or hear Old Testament readings, especially the “harder” verses, my inner voice says, “Yes, yes, yes.” And a feeling of hope and truth arises. A sentiment appears: “He’s giving us the answer, because He loves us and wants us to be our best;” “It was all true, all those ways of being do lead directly to death;” and many more similarly paradoxically positive reactions.

I leave you with the some of the words that we began with this morning; I leave you to contemplate not only their beauty, but the many exacting costs also present in them:

One thing have I desired of the Lord, **that** shall I seek after. That I may dwell in the house of the Lord **all the days of my life**, to behold the **beauty of the Lord**, and to enquire into the **Lord’s temple**.