

Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco, October 9, 2005

“Person to Person”

Spiritual Message by Bill Danz

Paul’s Letter to the Philippians 4.4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always.

I will say it again: Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be evident to all.

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with Thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ.

Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

Whatever you have received or learned from me or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

James 1.22-25

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, upon going away, immediately forget what they were like.

But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty and persevere being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.

Swedenborg, Divine Love & Wisdom 216

“According to angelic wisdom, unless volition and discernment, or desire and thought, or charity and faith, devote themselves to involvement in works or deeds whenever possible, they are nothing but passing breezes, so to speak, or images in the air that vanish. They first take on permanence in us and become part of our life when we perform and do them. The reason is the final stage is the composite, vessel and foundation of the prior stages.”

Person to Person

James tells us to be doers of the word.

Paul tells us to put it into practice.

I think it is in the Book of Nike that says Just Do It

But what is that exactly?

It has to be more than a list of dos and don'ts, thou shalts and thou shalt nots.

A few weeks ago, the church council gathered on a Saturday for a working session with Rich Tafel. He asks us a few questions, like, "What first brought you to this church?"

Not many of us are born and raised Swedenborgian. And like so many, my first visit here was for a wedding – my own. 18 years ago... tomorrow.

He asks us what does this church do better than any other?

My reply – it kept me coming back. It made coming to church something I wanted to do.

Mark Twain said, "Habit is habit, and not to be flung out the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time."

I certainly had a habit of doing just about anything on a Sunday other than going to church. And this church did coax me back. As much as anything it was the spiritual message, not only embodied in this special space, but the way it was made accessible and given life in the lessons of life, of love, and spirit and service.

We started coming regularly sometime after our first daughter Katie was born. I wanted my children to have a spiritual foundation and I liked the idea of co-pastors - male and female – wanting my daughter to see that she could aspire to any position of leadership, including spiritual.

And the lessons of this church helped me to appreciate the relevance of spiritual ideas to everyday life. Swedenborg's concept of "Uses" is a wonderful perspective that for me, makes so much sense.

Swedenborg's is a universe of interacting uses. All the love and wisdom of creation is constantly recreated as each one provides service and receives service from others. People serve others and their community, while simultaneously being served.

Use is not confined to human action. It is found throughout and at every level of creation. A message echoed by John Muir when he said, "When we pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

We fulfill ourselves through our relationships with others and each interaction, every small kindness, every task done with care and integrity is a recapitulation of God's Divine Plan.

A couple of years ago, I helped chaperone Katie's 7th grade field trip to Yosemite National Park. For 5 days the 7th graders explored Yosemite in groups of 12 each led by a guide from the Yosemite Institute.

On our final full day, the group I was with headed to the much anticipated Spider Caves. The Spider Caves are a series of caves at the foot of Yosemite Falls created by a massive rock fall long ago. They are called the Spider Caves, not because they are the lairs of the dreaded Yosemite jumping spider, but because if you were to map them out they form the shape of a spider.

This small community of 12 students, 2 adults with our guide from the Yosemite Institute reached the entry to the cave on the path to the foot of the falls.

The birth canal

Stepping down into a shallow well between boulders you find the opening to the Spider cave. It is small, so narrow you must slide in feet first and shimmy your way down on your back – so narrow it is known as the birth canal. Longer than you are tall, it is a triangular opening formed as massive slabs of granite came to rest on each other in that ancient rock fall. It's tight. You move your hips and push your way through and it seems to squeeze tighter, the deeper you go.

Now, you need only a small seed of claustrophobia to feel a little anxious once you are neatly jammed in that cold granite tube. You can easily lower your mind down that rope of imagination and get to know claustrophobia a whole lot better. But keep a tight grip on that rope cause your mind can start running off to all sorts of places – “Do they have earthquakes in Yosemite?”, “How far is the San Andreas fault from here?”

I have to admit I wasn't really concerned. I had the rational faith that the good people of the Yosemite Institute didn't happen upon a series of caves one day and, over supper that night, decide to send that group of 7th graders through to see if it was safe. I had faith.

Recently on the radio was the story of a mental health professional recently returned to the Bay Area after helping those affected by Hurricane Katrina. She was deeply saddened by the story of one woman. Having lost her family home and job, she was overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for both a young daughter and an elderly parent, said she had finally lost her faith in God.

She was in a type of spider cave. Circumstance pressing tightly around her, seemingly cold and unyielding as granite, every vestige of normalcy was lost. With the weight of your troubles pressing down, there was no quick or easy escape.

People stumble into spider caves all the time. Lose a job or a loved one upon whom you depended, receive the diagnosis of a serious disease, in the dark unable to see ahead, not sure what way to turn.

The passage

As you emerge feet first into the cave proper, you receive instructions from the one who went before you – “reach down with your right foot until you feel a ledge, then with your left foot, slide down until you can feel the next ledge, stand on that and on until you reach the bottom.

This is where the spider cave gets interesting – you emerge from the birth canal in total darkness. Not a single photon of light has followed you into the cave. The challenge of the spider cave is to traverse it without benefit of any visible light. Your only guide – the person in front of you, who learned the path just seconds before from the person in front of him.

My guide that day was a young man I had gotten to know over the past few days. A typical seventh grade boy – that combination of the rapier wit of Beavis, the boyish charm of Butthead. On our previous excursions he was much more interested in goofing with his friends while discussing video games than reveling in the natural wonders of the Yosemite Valley. Learning what distinguishes the bark of a Jeffery pine, or the pinecone of a Douglas fir - that did not exactly light his fire. And I have no doubt that, to him, I was just as boring

However, in the darkness of the cave something changed. He became my guide and protector. OK Mr. Danz, put your left hand down by your knee, fell that rock? Don't bang into it. Now turn your body sideways and come forward slowly. Now put your hand palm out six inches in front of you forehead. Come forward, When you feel he rock – duck.

We traveled through the cave this way, all 14 of us, each learning one small piece and then passing that on to the next in line. Up ahead I could here the instructions passed on. Kids, some of whom, in the typical social strata of a middle school would barely notice or talk to each other in the hallway, were helping each other, encouraging the nervous, each being useful receiving and giving help.

The spider cave was conquered step-by-step, person-to-person.

The belly of the spider

We reached a point in the cave where we stopped. Our guide told us to sit down. She lit a single candle. The small candle shed enough light to show us a cavern about half as big as this sanctuary, its ceiling much lower – an immense granite slab slanting over our heads. We were in the belly of the spider. In turn, each person talked about the experience.

In Proverbs is the line, “The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord”. There was a spirit in that cavern far brighter than that single candle.

In Africa, the Bantu have a saying, “A person is a person through other persons”. They were all feeling like persons that day.

To live for others is to perform uses. They are the bonds of society...and infinite in number.

With every action and contact

In the work we do

With the service we give

In the help we receive

And In the life we lead

We are connected,

To the divine love of God's creation

Especially when we do it - person to person.