

## Choosing Spinach

Next week is the Spiritual Nurture Retreat here at Cincinnati Friends. The phrase “spiritual nurture” suggests, of course, ways we find to nourish our souls or spirits. Several things occur to me—first is that, as people who live in a highly developed nation, we have too much time to think about ourselves. For many Americans, our lifestyle does not require us to think of others, so though we have all our physical needs met, and more “stuff” than we need, we still sense something missing. Perhaps that “something” involves thinking of ourselves a bit less and of others a bit more. It occurs to me that some of us—not all, this message is not for everyone here, only some of us—some of us go about nourishing our spirits similar to the ways we nourish our bodies. In other words, even though we know spinach is better for our bodies than brownies, we reach for comfort foods. Then, of course, we feel guilty and resolve to change, but such habits are hard to break. Like spinach for our bodies, we know in serving others we nourish our own spiritual growth, but in spite of ourselves, we find ways to avoid serving sorts of situations and go down the buffet line passing up the spinach salad.<sup>1</sup>

This leads to one of the oldest conversations among Christians, and for that matter, other religious traditions. The following quotation comes from an article by Dr. Stephen Post, a bioethicist at Case Western Reserve University and president of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, which is dedicated to the “scientific study of altruism.”

All the great world religions have succeeded in part because they espouse — and ritualize — an ideal of universal, altruistic love (“love of neighbor,” regard and empathy

---

<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that we *should* seek to serve others in order to serve ourselves, nor that self-gratification is an admirable motivation for service. I am merely pointing out that frequently one who serves unselfishly is nourished spiritually.

for the stranger, the Other), just as they require a stewardship over the gift of one's own life and the lives of those who are near and dear. Within Christianity, for example, finding the correct balance between love for kin, friends, "neighbors" (since in Christianity, no one is to be a stranger), the neediest, and enemies has been debated by biblical scholars and theologians in virtually every century. One opinion is consistent over time, however: the faithful must struggle to balance love (agape) for the near and dear with love for the neediest, and the outcome must lean toward the neediest and away from the self or the family, the near and dear. From first century Christianity, when "house churches" were open to the neighbor and the needy, to modern concerns about the insular tendencies of Christian families in a bourgeois consumer culture, the matter of the proper "order of love" has been paramount in all theological-ethical reflection.<sup>2</sup>

It certainly has been paramount in my own "theological-ethical reflection," beginning when I was thirteen years old and decided I could not be a Christian. Why? Not because I had no faith, but because for me *a true Christian* could not be someone who "accepted Christ as personal savior" and then just went on with life as usual. I knew, though no one told me, that being a *true* follower of Jesus required me to dedicate my life to living as he taught us:

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Mat 16:24 -25)

and "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Mat 19:21)

and ". . . whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mat. 20:26-28)

and ". . . for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, must as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me." (Mat. 25:35-36)

My understanding of these teachings was that I should go (rather immediately) to Africa or somewhere and serve those in need—feeding, clothing, visiting, and caring for them. At thirteen, I already knew I was too selfish to give up my dreams of college,

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Post. "Regarding the Other: Altruistic Love as Religious Ideal and Scientific Project" from *Science and Spirit* website, [http://www.science-spirit.org/printerfriendly.php?article\\_id=192](http://www.science-spirit.org/printerfriendly.php?article_id=192)

marriage, family, travel, etc. in order to devote myself to serving others. Not only was I too selfish, I was not “turned that way,” i.e., I had no inclination toward cooking, cleaning, or nursing the sick. With the bright, hard clarity of an adolescent, I judged any other form of “being a Christian” hypocritical and thus, I judged myself incapable of being a *true* Christian.

Though I am no longer quite so judgmental of myself and others, and I acknowledge many forms of service, I am still inclined to believe the truest followers of Jesus are those who dedicate their lives to serving others in concrete ways. I am awed by people like John Woolman, Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, Dorothy Day, Bruce Mortenson (who builds schools in Afghanistan), and many thousands not so famous who serve with no less dedication—people whose lives are given entirely to loving service. Certainly they are role models for the rest of us, but if we can’t do as these people have done, we can still find ways to serve others.

Another name for service is “altruism,” which comes from the Latin word for “others,” so in a way it means “otherism.” Psychologists and social scientists studying the effects of altruism have found, oddly enough, that those who serve others often reap benefits themselves, “improving their mental health, their physical well-being, even their longevity.” For instance, in a five-year study of elderly couples, “people who reported helping others—even if it was just giving emotional support to a spouse—were only about half as likely to die as those who did not.” Another group of researchers “reported that improved mental health seemed to be more closely linked to giving help than to receiving it. When demands are constant and exhausting, however, the effect on

a giver's mental health is negative.<sup>3</sup> (Perhaps this is why Jesus often went off alone and avoided crowds for a while.)

In thinking about the odd contradiction between our attraction to service and our avoidance of it, I found a helpful delineation of what Dr. Stephen Post calls "spheres of love." Dr. Post claims, "There are spheres of love, just as there are spheres of justice." He delineates four such spheres beginning with first, that sphere of relationships closest to us, i.e., kin and friends, "in which we *know* one another, often deeply." A second sphere of love is for "neighbors," "those at greater distance . . . whom we often do not know in the least, and who are not especially needful, but about whom we must be concerned," such as, for instance, people down the block or guests who require our hospitality. The third sphere "includes the most needy, such as people who are severely ill or famished." The fourth sphere of love takes in "the criminal or the enemy who [may pose] a threat to self or others."

And then Dr. Post makes an intriguing statement: "The first and second of these spheres," he says, "are appropriately *haunted* by the requirement of attentive love in the third and fourth spheres. However, love in these last two spheres should never eclipse the first two."<sup>4</sup>

I agree that for me personally, my love of family and neighbor spheres are "haunted" by a call to be attentive to the love for neediest and enemy spheres. I'm not sure I agree with his final statement, however, that "these last two spheres should never eclipse the first two," especially the "should." Perhaps one must make a choice of

---

<sup>3</sup> Carey Goldberg, "For Good Health, It Is Better to Give, Science Suggests." *Globe.com* website, *The Boston Globe* 11/28/2003.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Post. "Regarding the Other."

spheres to focus on—for instance, the list of people I mentioned at the beginning of this message: Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, Dorothy Day, and Bruce Mortenson—these people could not have accomplished what they did if their love for the neediest and the “enemy” had not “eclipsed” their love for family and neighbors. One cannot do it all—or as Thomas Kelly phrased it, “We cannot hang ourselves on every cross, nor should we.” If, however, we have chosen lives that focus love on kin and friends, we can (and should) add depth and dimension to our lives by giving some attention to the spheres of love that include the neediest and those who might be “enemies.”

In 2003 I attended the “Strange Birds” conference at a religious retreat center in Wisconsin, a conference for people who felt called to ministry that did not fit neatly into a particular niche. At the conference were three Quakers, six American Baptists, and one African prophet (he was one of the presenters). One of the American Baptists, an older man, spoke movingly of going with his church group every year to a village in Central America where they worked on constructing and maintaining a clinic. He said he had gone there with typical American arrogance to “help the poor villagers,” to take the Gospel to them. When he spoke of the villagers who gave so freely of the little they had, and of how his own soul had been nourished by his encounter with them, he choked back tears. “I went to serve,” he said, “and found that I was served.”

Service to others. We are a bundle of contradictions about service—we know, like spinach, it’s good for us. But like children, we prefer brownies and often pass up the spinach salad. A steady diet of brownies and other comfort food, however, leads to malnourishment and discontent.

Next Saturday at the Spiritual Nurture Retreat here at Cincinnati Friends Meeting, we will listen to each other for the different ways our souls hunger and

together seek nourishment for our spirits. On that day, as we seek ways to improve our spiritual health, let us remember the high-nutritional content of service.