

WHAT MATTERS MOST

One of the most difficult tasks we have in life is knowing what matters most. It is not hard to determine what *matters*. Many things matter. But determining what matters *most* is the hard task.

The English poet, John Oxenham wrote:

*"To every person there openeth
A way and ways and a way;
and the high soul treads the high
way;
and the low soul gropes the low;
and in between on the misty flats
the rest drift to and fro;
But to every person there openeth
a high way and a low;
And every person decideth
the way their soul shall go."*

I hear a lot of younger people declaring today they cannot find meaning in life. When one feels this way it is hard to make the important decisions of vocation, goals and ends.

The meaning of life is not found by improving our means, but by clarifying our objectives. We have improved our means through our amazing techniques. All areas of work and labour are now much less physical and time consuming. In my own life I have seen dairy farming progress from driving cows into the barn from the back pasture, chained to their stall and fed, cleaned and milked by hand, to present day milking parlours, milking machines, computerized feeding and cleanout equipment. The only thing the same is that the farmer who produces this necessary product is ill paid for his work and investment.

Today in our information technology millions of jobs will be

destroyed, but, perhaps, it will also create millions of new ones.

Our present swing to place an utilitarian emphasis in education obscures cultural values, and there is a distinct aversion to spiritual values. But as John Naisbitt points out in his book, "Megatrends 2000", as he speaks of the vast and rapidly increasing technology of our time, "We must evolve spiritually if we are to handle the responsibility of manipulating life itself."

Thoreau, the American essayist, poet and naturalist predicted that our scientific inventions would be improved means to unimproved ends.

We are building a technology and chaining ourselves to it, and our opportunities for feeling and being are fewer than ever. Today there is a growing shortage of purely feeling experiences. Aspirations need to be balanced by bliss.

The meaningful purposes and goals of life involve religion. "What shall I do in life?" is essentially

(What Matters Most, cont'd)

a religious question. Religion is concerned primarily with the transformation of ones inner nature and only secondarily with ones outer fashion and behaviour. To those who judged only by superficial standards, Jesus said, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." (St. Mark 7:21,22).

There are those like Benjamin Franklin who said that honesty is useful because it assures credit. This may be true, but it is not religious. The greatest reward for being honest comes from the inner satisfaction of being truthful and candid. If that assures credit, well and good. If it does *not* assure credit, well and good. Living our principles is its own reward.

Religion and ethics belong together. Without ethical concern religion becomes a sterile formality, an empty form. Without religion ethics loses its meaning.

St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians (4:8) closes by urging one who wishes to know what matters most to calculate or think on "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable." He adds, "if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

The trouble with many of us is that we are eccentric, and we live in a society of eccentric people. That is to say, we are "off centre," not living in harmony or equilibrium with the sacred in life. Because we are self-centred and not attuned to the Holy, we are not a centred society and miss the true meaning of life.

Let me point out to you that many times in the days to come in your life you are going to have to make hard decisions regarding what matters most. The decisions you make will be the most important that you make.

*Life is too brief
Between the budding and the falling
leaf,
Between the seed time and the golden
sheaf,
For hate and spite.
We have no time for malice or for
greed;
Therefore, with love make beautiful the
deed;
Fast speeds the night.
Life is too swift
Between the blossom and the winter's
snow's drift,
Between the silence and the lark's
uplift,
For bitter words.
In kindness and in gentleness our
speech
Must carry messages of hope, and reach
The sweetest chords.*

- W.M. Vories

From "Christ in the Concrete
City:

"I believe in looking after `number one.' / He's the chap that counts in the end. / The greatest thing is not to get involved. / whatever you do don't commit yourself. / We go out for an evening's entertainment, / Or even to the Joneses, who have a television set. / We are the viewers. / We are the audience. / Untouched, / Uncommitted."

CONVICTION MUST BE ACTED UPON

"Are you going to spend your whole life saying 'ought'?" George Bernard Shaw asks. "Turn your oughts into shalls."

The New Testament in the Letter to the Ephesians exhorts those with convictions to "Take your stand then with truth."

Hiding ones convictions under a bushel will extinguish them. Principles become realistic when they are interpreted and explained to others, defended, and propogated.

There are good reasons for taking ones stand when the principle and the time are right.

Such standing is never mere endurance; it is militant and positive; it adds courage to any situation; it is the beginning of another advance. Steadfastness has inner bulwarks which cannot be easily destroyed. It releases the resources of humanity.

Sometimes one stands to find the road again, or to wait for a clearer light, or to recover strength, or till help comes.

There are losses under which, for a while, one can do no more than keep steadfast in faith and hope. Sometimes that is all we can do, but it may be everything.

There are situations and times when it appears we can make no seeming headway, but in which the refusal to give up is the beginning of a new advance.

The poet James Russell Lowell declared:

*"They are slaves who fear to speak
for the fallen and the weak;
They are slaves who will not choose
Hatred, scoffing and abuse
rather than in silence shrink
From the truth they needs must think;
They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three."*

We live in a world where

enthusiasm and criticism go side by side. Where you get the enthusiast you usually get the critic and the cynic too.

But conviction is one of the inalienable features of religion, for faith cannot be neutral or tentative.

Then it is one must take ones stand with truth.

LOVE IS SOMETHING YOU DO

Jesus' ministry was short but extraordinary because of his witness to the power and healing of love.

St. Paul caught the significance of this and declared, "and above everything else, be truly loving, for love binds all the virtues together in perfection." (The Letter of Paul to the Colossians, Chapter 3, verse 14).

The apostle John wrote, "The person whose life is lived in love does, in fact, live in God." (The First Letter of John, chapter 4, verse 16).

It was Jesus himself who said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (The Gospel According to St. John, chapter 13, verse 35).

The very heart of the Christian faith is love, for as St. John declared, "God is love." (The First Letter of John, chapter 4, verse 8). John had already stated, "let us love not merely in theory or in words; let us love in sincerity and in practice."

This love that Jesus witnessed was so fulfilled it caused the early Christians to coin a new word for it. They called it, in Greek, "agape", love greater than the ordinary. Agape may be translated as "Christian love."

Jesus lived this love. He met

(LIVE LOVE, cont'd)

a man dressed in rags, who smelled to high heaven. He was covered with lice. He was repulsive. Jesus was repulsed by the man's terrible conditions, but he reached out his hand and helped him.

Love is something you do.

The Good Samaritan was an outcast in his society, a half-breed pariah in the eyes of the Jews, but he was the one who helped the wounded man by the side of the road.

Love is something you do.

Modern humanity has the means to overcome most of our social ills, but we lack love. As one person put it: The question of my own bread is material. The question of my neighbour's bread is a spiritual matter.

CHURCH JOINS VOICES AGAINST WORKFARE

Fears are being raised by some that the present Ontario government's program of "Ontario Works", which is being put into operation to replace the long-time welfare system, is flawed.

Claimed to give its participants valuable experience and skills required to gain employment and to become self-sufficient, the new programme, with the present high unemployment and lack of jobs, appears to be destined to put many jobless people at clean-up and occasional work in the community.

The United Church, at its meeting of the Hamilton Conference last summer declared no to the new programme. Composed of around 350 congregations in the regions of Niagara, Hamilton-Wentworth, Halton, Brant, Haldimand-Norfolk, Wellington and Bruce, the delegates agreed to "Say no! to mandatory workfare" and to "Encourage congregations...to find ways to stand in solidarity with

the poor in our communities, in this painful time, in this opposition to Mandatory Workfare."

The social planning Council of

Metropolitan Toronto says the programme appears based on the assumption that slotting someone into a job is the same as creating a new job, and ignores the possibility that they will simply be shuffling the population on assistance. They point out as well that the assurance workfare will not displace any paid workers will be impossible to monitor and enforce.

Though the workfare programme meets the popular contemporary point of view that every citizen must give something in order to get something, the Ontario programme appears to simply trade welfare assistance and job training for low wage, intermittent work in which the recipients will not end up better off financially or trained.

Forced to do mundane work under duress and without freedom does not meet our common responsibility to treat those who truly cannot help themselves justly and humanely.

"...I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me....

St. Matthew 25:35

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