

THE STAIRCASE

In West Texas, there is a famous oil field known as the “Yates Pool. During the depression, this field was a sheep ranch, owned by a man named Ira Yates. Mr. Yates was not able to make enough money on his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, so he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family had to live off of a government subsidy. Day after day as he grazed his sheep over those rolling West Texas hills, he must have worried and wondered if he would ever be able to pay his bills. I wonder if he ever prayed to God for help, or maybe even for some miracle. He came close to losing it all.

One day a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told Mr. Yates that there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease. At 1,115 feet they struck a huge oil reserve, giving 80,000 barrels a day. In fact, thirty years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed that it still could flow 125,000 barrels a day. And Mr. Yates owned it all.

The day Mr. Yates purchased the land, he had received the oil and mineral rights. Yet he and his family were eventually living on relief. He was a multimillionaire living in poverty. What was the problem? The problem was that he did not know the oil was there. He owned it, but he did not possess it. Of course, after the truth was known and the oil and money began to flow, Mr. Yates’ life changed quite a bit.

Such stories, of necessity, cannot happen to very many of us. But they are frequent enough to be intriguing. Those of us who are not already rich wonder what it would be like to suddenly come into great amounts of money. In the eyes of ninety percent of the people alive on the earth today, we are all incredibly rich. Yet we still wonder what it would be like.

Far more fascinating, to me at least, are the people sitting on top of vast “pools” of spiritual wealth who live in spiritual poverty because they do not know it. And these pools are not limited to occasional oil deposits, but are as vast and all-pervading as the presence of the

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Creator of all things. This is not the story of an occasional “lucky” shepherd. This is, in some sense, everyone’s story. We all sit atop vast spiritual wealth and resources. To a large extent, we do not seem to know this – that is, we do not live or act as if it were there. We own it, but we do not possess it. We can barely pay our spiritual bills. We keep running out of forgiveness, serenity, humility, peace, love, surrender. It often feels like we are close to losing it all, turning back into animals or into machines. Or it gets so we just plain want to quit on the whole affair. The truth (and we know it in our saner moments) is that spiritual wealth is more important, more exciting, more to be sought after than material wealth. There is no need to make them mutually exclusive, but, when we need clarity or it is time to prioritize, spirit is more and greater than matter.

However, we live in a world full of angry, bored, neurotic, frightened, lonely, anxious, belligerent, sick, deceptive, nervous, tired, depressed people. (Did I leave anybody out?) These are all signs of spiritual poverty. That’s right! The Seven Deadly Sins are merely symptoms of spiritual poverty. Isn’t it interesting that most often we try to “cure” these very things with more money? Or at least we dream that if we had more material resources, we could be free of such things. And life keeps teaching us again and again that it takes a different resource – a different kind of power – to cure such things.

So we often find ourselves working harder and harder to make more money or to please certain people or to get into certain positions, when the thing that really would help is more humility or more trust or a deeper experience of prayer. And how do we get such things?

Unfortunately, years ago somebody started the rumor in our culture that things like love, a good marriage, friendship, wisdom, spiritual awareness, closeness to God, Christians ethics, and benevolence all come naturally, automatically – that we do not have to think or plan or work for them very much. So we stopped teaching religion in the home; we cut it down to an hour or half an hour a week in church school. Then we filled these most-important teaching positions with whoever would volunteer, regardless of motive or capability. Then we slowly encroached upon this time and effort with every conceivable kind of competition – from Boy Scouts to butterflies; from camp-outs to sporting events. With rare exceptions, there is no place and no time left in our society for spiritual training or development. Except in the most superficial ways, it is not considered important.

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So how do we go after humility, faith, wisdom, prayer, spiritual wealth? Well, God does have to provide it. But on our part, we go after it much like we would go after money or position: we start thinking about it all the time; we start learning all we can; we train; we work hard; we dedicate ourselves to it. And while our society as a whole has turned to other things, there are still those in every age and in every country who still head for the spiritual life as the highest meaning and purpose of life on this planet. Most of them in some ways – and some of them in great ways – blaze the trail for those of us who wish to come too.

If, as Christians believe, God loves his people, then the possibility that everything – that is, to know God – hinges on “the system” or on a specific approach (denomination or religion) is remote indeed. Any “way” is likely to work because God desires to be known and to give himself to – that is, to love – his people. Interestingly, this question of exclusiveness is the most frequently asked theological question in this parish.

On the other hand, because of the “distance” and “difference” between God’s being and our level of consciousness, it is also unlikely that *any* way will work without an extreme, intentional hunger on our part – that is, without total commitment. Sometimes I get the uneasy feeling that those asking the question are looking for some excuse to not take *any* “way” with utter devotion themselves.

It is standard to all spiritual paths that they require being our top priority. They require daily discipline. They require setting aside other goals and endeavors, at least insofar as those others interfere. They require a complete change of conscious attitudes and perspectives. They require a reworking of ego (humility). They require endurance and devotion. It is not “religions” that are no good or that hold us back, though none of them are perfect. It is devotees faking or fooling around with their devotion that keep blurring the issues and obscuring the paths.

On occasion I try to highlight some principle or step that is basic to progress in the spiritual life. I do not limit these comments to things I know and do best. I often need to hear my sermons more than some of you do. Maybe that’s why I can even appreciate some of them more than you do. Anyway, while some think that the old adage “practice what you preach” is sensible, it would leave us each preaching ourselves instead of Jesus or His Gospel. Jesus has more to teach you than I or any other preacher can “live up to.”

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Some of the “steps” along the spiritual path are found in some form in almost every spiritual “way” of every major religion.

TITHING. If you are not dedicating your money in a clear and serious discipline, you do not mean it yet.

FIND A MENTOR. Plenty of life is “alone,” and part of the spiritual path cannot be shared. But every spiritual “way” I have heard of stresses the importance of a regular mentor (confessor/priest/guru/friend/teacher – whatever) to talk to.

DAILY DEVOTIONS. A serious discipline of prayer, meditation, Bible study, surrender, check-in for duty.

These are some of the items I keep mentioning from time to time. I think no one can hear them too often. I doubt if anyone can do them *too* well. I will not mention them all again today, but I want to talk about another one, so I am trying to indicate the category and importance. Nobody makes much spiritual progress without paying attention to the basics. Finesse and fancy footwork exist, but first, last, and always come the basics.

One of the basic disciplines – one of the basic steps of the spiritual path – is **HELPING OTHERS**. That does sound so basic, so familiar – like, why even bother to mention it? It does until or unless we think to ask, “Help others to what?” The generalized “helping others” that has become such a familiar Christian cliché is often a far cry from the spiritual discipline once intended. If you were a “Christian,” you helped others to become Christians. Specifically and one at a time, you tried to bring another person onto the Path you yourself were walking. That is the basic principle behind evangelism. It is also the principle behind the priesthood of all believers. It is also much of the business end of the covenant community.

There are two sides to this discipline. One is for believers to help each other as they each walk the spiritual journey and seek to incorporate more and more of the Christian Life into their own living. This is essential, but by itself it is insufficient. The second part of the discipline is to bring in new members. Some people have never tried the Christian Path. They do not know in any clear way what it is actually like or all about. If the members help only each other, their own community will soon die. But more than that, for many reasons, the community itself will stagnate. And many will not have a chance to know the Life they seek most.

In some places, to be sure, there are Christians and communities of Christians who “mean it” more than we do. But American Christians are not evil, by any normal definition. We are just preoccupied with so many “other” things. As Jesus’ parable says: *“When the owner of the vineyard comes, how do you think he will deal with those tenants? He will ... hand over the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop when the season comes.... The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that yields the proper fruit.”* (Matthew 21:41,43)

For a number of years, Andrew Carnegie made up the annual deficit of the New York Philharmonic Society. His wife loved music, and he knew it would please her. But one year, at a meeting of the directors, he made the suggestion that the responsibility should not be his alone. It had become too comfortable. The Society just assumed his support and did not try very hard to be more financially independent or responsible. So Mr. Carnegie told them, “From now on, I think the burden should be shared. You raise half the deficit from other donors, and I will give the remaining half. It will be less difficult than you imagine, once you get busy at it.”

Not many days later, Mr. Carnegie was informed by the directors that his condition had been satisfied. He was very pleased and said, “I told you it would be possible. How did you go about it? Where did it come from?” The chagrined answer, of course, was, “We got it from Mrs. Carnegie.” The church has been doing this for years: robbing Peter to impress Paul; keeping it in the family. It’s nice to keep things cozy, but, beyond a certain point, no good comes from it.

In any case, helping others (as a spiritual principle) does not mean just any old help, willy-nilly, toward any purpose. Certainly it is not just the help somebody may decide to ask us to give, or help according to some goal we ourselves have devised. It is a specific requirement to help another to walk the Path that somebody has helped us to walk. It seems to me that the Christian church keeps forgetting this dimension when we speak about evangelism or teaching or helping others. To fully learn, one *must* teach. To truly understand, one *must* explain it to another. To enter fully into the Christian Life, one *must* bring another into it. We are not just talking about swelling the ranks or trying to succeed from a statistical standpoint, though some pragmatic principles, as always, may hint at spiritual truths beneath them. But God has put us into a world where each generation

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is succeeded by another, and where we must “reach” each new generation all over again just to break even. What fascinates me is the realization that evangelism is necessary and essential *first of all* to the evangelist!

Paul says, “*Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.*” Substitute the word “declare” for the word “preach” and take the phrase as something directed at you, and you have its real meaning. Jesus sends out the twelve, and later the seventy-two, to preach – as He had preached to them. Or consider the passage from Hebrews read this morning, or Colossians 3:12-17, or II Corinthians 3:12-18. The principle is clear and found in some manner on every authentic spiritual “way.”

The clearest analogy perhaps is that of a staircase. This comes from the path known to most as “The Gurdjieff Work.” The spiritual journey is pictured as a staircase. There are many steps; in all likelihood they are endless. We must take them one step at a time. The path is not smooth. We get a sudden breakthrough to a new level. Then usually we spend some time getting used to the new level. We may even stay there until we are bored or sick of it. Sometimes we stay too long because we are afraid of the next step. And yes, occasionally we drop back to see how it was at a former level. Bad days!

Nevertheless, and this is the point: It is taught that you cannot advance to the next step yourself *until you have helped another person to attain the step you are presently on.* It is taught as an unbeatable principle of life. We go up a step at a time. After we learn that step, comprehend it, understand its ramifications, know it, learn it, and make it our own, it is then incumbent upon us to help (to guide) someone else who is making this same step. Until we do that, we do not *fully* comprehend. Moreover, until we do that, we are not *allowed* to take the next step ourselves.

That is all I really wanted to mention this morning. I hope you will think about it and take it to heart. I hope you will stop thinking of “helping others” in the hackneyed old way.

Luigi Tarisio was found dead one morning with almost none of the familiar comforts in his home. He lived like a Spartan, on the edge of poverty. But 246 exquisite fiddles were found in his attic. He had been collecting them all his life. The best one of all was found in the

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bottom drawer of an old rickety bureau. One could not help but notice that in his very devotion to the violin, he had robbed the world of all that music for all the time he was alive, treasuring these great fiddles for himself – hiding them away. Others from whom he acquired them had often done the same. So the greatest of his collection, a Stradivarius, had been kept silent for 147 years. Only upon Luigi's death did it finally get to speak again.

Is that Stradivarius like the Gospel you know? Is that what we are doing with God's love? With the spiritual gifts God tries to lavish upon us?