

“Now That You’re Here, Make Yourself Useful”

San Francisco Swedenborgian Church

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Luke 10: 38-42: Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” [New Revised Standard Version]

American culture reveres doers. Doing gets you to your goals, and a big checklist for success can certainly program our days with non-stop doing. Axioms about doing encode our social consciousness:

Doing nothing is not an option.

Lead, follow, or get out of the way.

Just do it!

But Jesus pursues a different tack in the hallowed gospel scene of the time he dropped in at the home of the sisters Martha and Mary.

I once had a parishioner tell me that the one Bible story that really got up her nose was this one. I think she saw herself in Martha, and that Martha is a good way to be. She empathized with Martha, felt the urgent cares of Martha, carried the burdens of Martha. And not only is Martha not *thanked* for all her hard work

in this venerated tale, but she's actually rebuked for all of her doing! And her sister who hasn't lifted a finger—is praised! An intensely irritating little scene, she declared.

I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of us do not surreptitiously identify with Martha, and like my former parishioner, are a little proud of it. In our society people will sometimes cleverly refer to themselves as a workaholic in an apparent self-criticism, but it's really a way of boasting. Our culture is full of biographies of workaholics whose immense efforts pay off in Herculean results. The great doers, after all, are the ones who get featured, praised, and exalted in our cultural discourse. Many folks secretly would prefer the Donald Trump of “The Apprentice” fame to be in the role of Jesus here, with the tale ending, “Martha, Martha, how ceaselessly and efficiently you produce. Mary: you're fired!”

What is this teaching story scene really about? It has been interpreted in various ways in different epochs of Christian history. In our current contemporary period, it has been made increasingly clear through social analysis of ancient Near Eastern society that in the gospels Jesus broke molds of social roles for women—that in his social context Jesus was a feminist, and in the early church, before patriarchy became organizational theology, women often played rather revolutionary roles. Mary is sitting at the feet of a rabbi like a student would, though at that time only men could be students. She was refusing to stay in the kitchen, both literally and figuratively. So interest in the “Martha and Mary” account in recent times has highlighted this angle—that Mary was breaking boundaries, and Jesus was affirming her in choosing this, the better part.

But to go back to late antiquity and on through the middle ages, the dominant interpretive paradigm for this Lukan tale was to see in it one of the supreme texts illustrating the way of the monastic tradition. Martha and Mary were interpreted to represent spiritual types—the first of the active life and the second of the contemplative life, with Jesus stressing the higher calling of the contemplative life.

Jumping forward a half-millennium and more into Protestant history, we find countless “Martha and Mary” guilds that formed women’s auxiliary groups combining spiritual study (the Mary part) along with service projects (the Martha part), and thus the two sisters are put rather on a par. This very congregation had a Martha and Mary society for several decades in the twentieth century.

The Swedenborgian lens I think adds a great deal. Swedenborg also sees in Martha and Mary a presentation of two types that are to be integrated, so it isn’t about one type being superior to the other. But in a key way, there is a sense of Mary needing to infuse Martha. Swedenborg pegs Martha as natural love and Mary as spiritual love. Natural love comes first in our psychic formation. Natural love is an early stage in spiritual formation. Natural love provides the “get up and go,” our earliest natural capacities for moving and around and learning to do things in life. The plane of our inner sight, however, does not necessarily see that deeply into the affairs of life; it is not aware of the larger sphere of creative purpose that forms the deep source of all being—what some would call the divine basis of life. The gaze of natural love is more on the ground, and it is still largely *self*-focused. Martha is caught up in how much *she* is doing and so is focused within her self-effort.

Mary, by sitting at the feet of the master, blossoms as an emblem of trust anchored *beyond the self* in a higher power and purpose. Taken as a spiritual type, Mary doesn't stand for doing nothing, but for being centered in a higher power and thus becomes so in her doing. That is the better way. When spiritual love becomes the ground and anchor, we don't do less at all. It has therefore been common to move from making this distinction to then speaking of spiritual growth practices that can develop our Mary mind: Bible study, walking labyrinths, meditation, and many more ways to strengthen our inner spiritual capacities.

This summer I've been immersed in a study of the Swedenborgian idea of usefulness, which is an excellent key into seeing how progressive infusion of Martha and Mary takes place. When Wilson Van Dusen published in 1981 *Uses, A Way of Personal and Spiritual Growth*, it rapidly progressed into a runaway favorite in all quarters of Swedenborgiana, though in recent times now more than a decade after his death, his teaching on *usefulness* is not quite as prominent.

Van Dusen's as a human potential psychologist saw in Swedenborg's discussion on uses all the rudiments of a powerful spiritual growth method, and he remarks in the first paragraph that "The range and power of this method have been largely overlooked by students of Swedenborg's writings."

The core insight is that focusing on doing uses is a royal road to potent being. Let me turn to Lao Tzu for a foundational insight that is, well, useful: In the Tao de Ching (ch. 11), he makes the distinction between benefits and uses: "Benefit comes from what exists; usefulness comes from what does not yet exist." So a use is something that we create: it is one of the potentialities of our agency. We can choose to give our energy to bringing into being something that does not yet exist

and won't exist unless we do it. A true use produces profound goodness and comes from love: only love loves goodness, and only love desires to create goodness, and when love does create goodness it is in the form of usefulness, but love needs wisdom in order to move effectively, and that is why some call love, wisdom, and use the Swedenborgian trinity.

Usefulness, then, is an everyday way to infuse our Martha minds with Mary consciousness. But Mary needs Martha, too: love and goodness are abstract until made concrete. They need a form and a living embodiment to exist. Usefulness is that embodiment that not only is inspired by good wisdom but one that produces delights for others. To become useful is to become Martha and Mary fused.

Now here's something that very crucial. A true use holds joy and bliss. A true use feels good because it is harvesting the power of life in the best possible way: by giving it to others as well as to ourselves.

By seeing that the effects of usefulness are joy and bliss in both social and personal ways, Van Dusen had an "ah ha!" insight for a way to ground "everyday" spiritual growth: simply focus on what is useful in small and large ways. Training ourselves to ask, "how can I be useful today?" itself opens the Mary mind. It opens the higher mind and better orients Martha.

There are many ways to experiment with this spiritual growth method of usefulness. So one is, "How can I be useful here?" What a grounding question, an organizing question, a deeply good question, a centering question.

Another tactic is to identify something you already love doing a lot and experiment with how it might be honed to provide something useful to others. On a big scale we all know the stories of those who found a way to turn a hobby into a career, but such a personal development tactic can be made fruitful on smaller scales, as well. My dad was an engineer who specialized in problem-solving. He was never happier than when he was trying to fix something, and though he did that for a living, he found that as a somewhat quiet guy he liked to provide that use when we visited relatives' houses. He became known for that, it made a lot of things better for those whom he loved, and he was in his heaven. Being useful through an existing love multiplied love and goodness: Martha and Mary fused. When successful, the concrete productions of *doing* increases joy and delight for others as well as for oneself. Martha becomes Mary-infused.

Another method is to inquire as to our motivations in any of our doings. If we are seeking mostly a self-centered reward, that might be okay, for we must love ourselves as we would any other, but there are often times when our lower self-motivations are not actually conscious, and by asking the "for whom am I trying to be useful?" question, we enact that shift-of-consciousness that makes a Mary-infused Martha more likely. Just asking the question of whom is benefiting from the doing is probably a really good sign that there is an already existing love for bringing good things to other. Otherwise, the question wouldn't occur. Mere self-love would be the obvious spiritual state. But many of do love bringing uses to others, but we might easily go long stretches on auto-pilot caught up in our lower needs. Learning to more reflexively check our motivations is a Mary move, and by

itself allows energies and insights to enter our minds, heart, and ultimately hands in new ways.

Joseph Campbell, the late-great philosopher of world myths, once invoked T.S. Eliot's line to describe what he viewed as the waste-land lives of the majority of people he knew. "Many," he wrote, "are just wandering in the waste-land without any sense of where the water is---the source of what makes things green." Campbell was a serious critic of the busyness culture of America—a busyness that lacked a nurturing quality for the deeper reaches of inner being. He saw mostly Marthas in our culture, and perhaps he was on to something.

Maybe usefulness is a spiritual growth method that might catch your fancy. I don't know, but I agree with Wilson Van Dusen that it is a surprisingly powerful and accessible way to develop the inner life.

We might say that to the extent usefulness consciousness becomes increasingly extended in our daily consciousness of living, to that same extent we have chosen the better part.

