

Must A Person Be Active To Be Useful?

I will not easily forget a radio programme I heard some years ago, when two nuns were being interviewed, both from a religious Order dedicated to Prayer. For hours each day the nuns of this Order spend their time in Prayer. It is an extraordinary and unusual commitment they have. Hours of silence and physical in-activity. Only few could do it.

There are those who would, and do, look upon such a life as a useless one. And I know I thought about this at the time and have thought about it since. Certainly by some standards and in terms of the criteria which are applied by many, spending hours in prayer, doing nothing else, would be regarded as unproductive and useless. Indeed a question is highlighted here which has wide ramifications for us as a community, and as participating members in that community, "Must a person be active to be useful?" And, conversely, "Is an inactive person essentially useless?"

More recently there was a discussion in the correspondence columns of one of our Sydney newspapers about old people, one of the letters, from a person advocating the right to die, ending with the comment which I quote: "There are many old people who are aware that they have outlived their usefulness and that they are now a burden on Society." (SMH page 12, March 6, 1982).

The thing is, of course, that they are now no longer able to cope with a job. Because of frailty they have perhaps become dependent on others. Whereas once they were contributing to the economy of the nation, paying taxes and all the rest, now they are recipients of the benefits the country provides. But, does this mean they have outlived their usefulness? The writer of the letter quoted from, clearly thinks they have. However, the stand taken in this talk tonight, and for what is hoped will be seen as good reasons, is otherwise.

Much of the trouble arises from a tendency to judge too narrowly of what constitutes usefulness. The young, the healthy, the workers, the contributors, in other words, those it is said, who are doing things, are the useful ones. The old, the sick, the non workers, the receivers of benefits, even nuns spending their lives in prayer and piety, these are the useless ones. And that, by the way, is basically the rule of thumb which comes out in the letter mentioned a moment ago.

It talks of those who have outlived their usefulness as if usefulness is only to be measured in obvious clearly recognisable, even economic terms. The question comes at us again, then, "Must a person be active to be useful"?

Having touched upon the situation the old can find themselves in, and frequently do, something is usefully said about this, first of all.

If they feel useless and isolated it is largely the result of these narrowly based assessments of what constitutes usefulness and because community attitudes and the very way we go about our lives relegates them to a backwater and consigns them to irrelevance. They don't have to feel useless. They shouldn't feel useless. They do indeed have a role to play and a use to perform.

Here is something which Swedenborg was inspired to write in his great work, "*Arcana Caelestia*", or sometimes known as "*Heavenly Secrets*"

"It is known that a man's state is of one kind in infancy, of another in childhood, another in youth, another in adult age, and another in old age. It is also known that a man puts off his state of infancy with its toys when he passes into the state of youth; that he puts off his state of youth when he passes into the state of young manhood; and this again when he passes into the state of mature age; and at last this state when he passes into that of old age. And if one will consider he may also know that every age has its delights, and that by these he is introduced by successive steps into those of the age next following".

A number of things need noting here.

One is that our progression through different ages, through infancy, childhood, young manhood, adulthood and old age, is all according to the order of things. This is the way the Lord wills it should be.

Another thing to note is that each of these different ages has its particular purpose and pleasures. Each brings with it different uses we can serve. The 50 year old adult does not have the energy and daring that he or she had at the age of 20 and cannot now hope to do some of the things which were so easily done then. At the same time there are other contributions and uses to be served, at 50, that that person had no conception of earlier, at age 20. So also in the case of a 60 year old, a 70 year old, and an 80 year old.

We repeat the point: every age has its particular purpose and pleasures. In every age there are uses to be performed. If community attitudes and narrowly based criteria for what constitutes usefulness have made our older people feel useless that is our fault, not theirs. And we can be the losers in that we are not open to the use they can serve amongst us. We can all too easily, for example, overlook the perspective that they have to offer.

How refreshingly different and reassuring it can be to come within the influence of people who are no longer caught up in the very competitiveness of day to day living. And what of the benefit to us from having to make sacrifices for the elderly? Having to put ourselves out. Having to be more patient than we might otherwise be. Having to give of our time. All these things can be of real and positive benefit to us.

This also needs to be said, that usefulness doesn't have to be seen or measured entirely insofar as other people or the community are concerned. Our progression through the different ages or stages of life serves a supremely important use where our own regeneration and preparation for the life of heaven is concerned. The Lord provides for example, that in the accepting, guileless, trusting attitudes of infancy and childhood, when, as well, there is present a love for these kinds of things, we have a wonderful opportunity to instil simple Bible truths, concepts of right and wrong; memories of Bible heroes, and so on. Similarly, and in old age, the Lord provides that in the midst of diminished physical ability which invariably accompanies it, people may be brought to see and acknowledge where the true strength of life lies .

If the old people seem to be leading useless lives so far as this world is concerned, let us be quick to remind ourselves that we don't know what uses are being served within and so far as their spiritual growth and development is concerned. We don't know what conflicts they are yet resolving. We don't know what temptations they are yet struggling with. We are not in a position to know or to say accurately how their lives and how their presence is yet affecting people around them. We can be blind to a use they may yet be serving to other patients in the ward or home where they live; even to the nursing staff.

Once again, from the work "*Arcana Caelestia*", or "*Heavenly Secrets*":

"the internal man, or man's spirit, does not know what old age is; but as the body, or external man, grows old, the internal passes into newness of life, a man's spirit being perfected by age as his bodily powers diminish."

How beautifully this teaching infills and gives meaning to the promise at the end of Isaiah Chapter 40:

“He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

There is just one other teaching on this subject to which reference must be made. It concerns not only the old, but people of every age, and once again seriously calls into question the altogether too narrow assessment of usefulness to which we have been referring.

Every person living on earth is in close association, as to their spirit, with the spiritual world and with heaven and hell there. We in fact, by our adult choices, determine which of the two, heaven or hell, is able to draw closest to us. And the environment we create is not something that affects only ourselves. Slight and insignificant thought it may be, that association we have been instrumental in creating, affects the spiritual environment in which all people live.

Physically inactive though we may be yet a use can be served by, for instance, humbly reading the Word of God and striving to put into practice its precepts and principles. By so doing we cannot but attract a closer angelic and heavenly presence, the effects of which go far beyond ourselves. And the reverse is true, that by cherishing and doing what is evil we attract a closer presence of the hells and that, too, has an impact far beyond ourselves, affecting, even though ever so slightly, the spiritual environment in which our fellows live.

Must a person, we asked, be active to be useful? And the answer is no. (Realise, of course, that this is not an excuse for loafing or for doing nothing; some kind of charter for not doing work). The aim of the talk has been to draw attention to aspects of usefulness frequently overlooked; of which, in fact, there may be no comprehension.

The Swedenborg Program – Number 53.

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