

REFLECTIONS ON THE SERMON “WALKING ON WATER.”

BY KENNETH & JANET BRIGGS

Your authors were so taken by the above sermon delivered recently by Rev. Stephen Cole at the Bryn Athyn cathedral and reviewed in the Bryn Athyn Post (Aug. 16, 2007,) that they took the unprecedented step, for them, of ordering a CD of that service and reviewing it several times. The challenging title and the vivid visual images it evokes caught our attention. We took away a new perspective of the role of temptation as a necessary, skill-building struggle, not merely a personal striving to avoid doing deliberately evil deeds.

In this new view of temptation, such a struggle may take the form of a tempest of feelings when we finally realize that we are not able to overcome, or even endure, a present situation through our personal efforts and resources alone and we have not yet abandoned enough personal pride to allow us to recognize that the Lord is with us in every particular and “ultimate” detail of every situation. Failing to recognize our personal limitations may leave us on the “downhill slope” that leads to despair and to a depression, which disempowers our inherent abilities to move forward, as friends of the Lord, willing and able to accept new revelation and to understand his ultimate will in our individual lives.

An additional perspective differing from what we usually entertain, included in the above sermon, is an acceptance that the Lord’s “O thou of little faith” comment to the sinking Peter describes “the inevitable human condition, that we are born and continue to be [in].” Your authors believe history bears witness that our differing individual perspectives may lead to conflict and failure to move forward. On the other hand, reliance on a single view from our own experience or one authority or scriptural interpretation may leave us with a picture of a flat

world, seen only in black and white and low definition. Since fatigue and forgetfulness regularly lead us to forget the Lord's presence with us throughout each day and decade, we stand in need of additional perspectives to keep both the temporal and the permanent—he eternal—dimensions of our lives consciously in focus.

The discussion between us following the above sermon revealed not surprisingly that our initial experience of its message differed considerably. After some discussion, we found that we had arrived at the same truths by way of our different modes of perception. Although difference of perception has persisted with us, even after many years of studying, discussing, writing and praying together, we remain firmly convinced of their complementarity. This experience confirms our conviction that the best team to maintain an ongoing awareness of the Lord's presence with us is the Church, in the form of husband and wife. We were delighted to read, "We value marriage between a man and a woman and honor the unique, complementary nature of each sex," listed as one of the five core values in the recently published *Statement of Purpose for the General Church*. (Emphasis added).

How can we understand the differences between the perceptions of husband and wife and their complementary nature? Dare we name or "personify" these thought processes which we glimpse as swiftly passing and ever changing? The depth of these questions brought to our mind the following quote from the philosopher Martin Heidegger who said, "In confronting the logos, men are uncomprehending... they do not comprehend the logos. ...that is to say, men are those who do not bring together...the logos, that which is permanently together, collectedness. Men are those who do not bring it together, who do not comprehend it in one, who do not compass it in one, and this regardless of whether or not they have heard it. Men do not

penetrate the logos even if they attempt to do so with words.” (Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1959)

Does the word ‘men’ in the above quotation, really refer to mankind, or only to the male of that species? In answer to the above, I (KB) was immediately confronted with my personal fascination with the Mount Everest of meaning, “In the beginning was the Word...”

I chose, logically enough, to start my climb through the Latin via *De Verbo* 14 and was thereby pleased to find Swedenborg’s explanation of the complementary relationship of the inmost (the Word) and the literal integument (word) of the same concept. My next reflection concerned a little book *The Definition of Definition* (Ralph Barsodi, Porter Sargent, Boston, 1967) that I had long treasured, if seldom read, and how little impressed my wife had been by that approach. Many times our paths of learning had crossed again after I had dallied along the low road and she had arrived there, by some mysterious process, well before me. I now realize that even in exploring the present topic, I could not just “penetrate the logos” by words alone.

Our own experience, plus the fact that Heidegger spoke and wrote in German, as well as his reliance on the ancient Greek Heraclitus,—all led us to think that men here is gender specific and the above describes the lack of depth in the thinking habits of the majority but not all of present day males. Newspapers often describe the laudable exploits of analytical “splitters” be it of quarks, microorganisms or points of civil law or scripture. A search of the literature indicates that, until very recently, authors of analytical publications were almost exclusively male. In this article, we wish to compare this male analytic ability to the “collectiveness” of the thinking of many but not all women and to explore the complementarity of these modes of thinking.

Since most of us find it very difficult to stay focused on the

details of our daily tasks and their spiritual eternal dimension at the same time, we may need reminders and encouragement from our spouse. We have good evidence that, at least in the later half of his life, Swedenborg was able to live and function very well, simultaneously in a temporal society and the spiritual realm. This may have been one of the reasons that he did not need to marry in our temporal world.

A man, or at least the most masculine part of his ego, is apt to seek positions that protect his power. He does not focus deeply enough to recognize and accept the revelations that the Lord has for him regarding what yearns to be born in a particular situation. He (man) tends to hold back.

What then is it about the constitution of most, if not all, women that can complement the male wisdom that she often admires and free her spouse to move forward in step with the Lord's progression? If this reputed gift of hers is now ready to come forth into full bloom, from whence does it come? Was it built into her mitochondrial DNA from the time that our Creator introduced "gender," or has it only begun to find its function and its name since some of our male dominated cultures began to be enlightened enough to consider it and allow it to be investigated and published?

In search of a name for this feminine function as well as some description of how it works, we herein consult not only the *Writings* and the Gospels as well as footprints in the recorded mythologies of ancient civilizations but also its overt expression in the published opinions of some of our modern women writers.

In True Christian Religion 783, Swedenborg uses references to all four gospels to the emerging Christian Church as the bride to be claimed by the bridegroom, i.e. the Lord, in the marriage of good and truth. Numerous other Gospel episodes point to an awareness of woman as an ubiquitous, perhaps necessary component of the labors which bring forth the New and the

Good. Take for example Mary at the wedding at Cana, Mary Magdalene at the tomb, the women at the foot of the cross. There are as well earlier and later myths of vegetation goddesses, or women as spiritual guides, such as Sophia, an archetype of the feminine and nourishing images which function in the development of mature consciousness in individuals and in cultures; then the maidens bearing the Holy Grail, etc. The Writings often associate truths and wisdom with the masculine and “the good” with feminine. However, what does it mean to bring the good?

In order to get to the good, one must gather: Gathering the complexity of specific situations, including the conflicting and complicated particularities and also the eternal dimension that is there within the temporal, attempting to bring each situation into focus and to hold both planes in our awareness.

We see this in the story of the disciples putting to sea in their boat, a man-made, even if inspired structure, which they trusted to bear them safely across the waters. They were not prepared for a radical change in the weather, nor could they foresee the transformation of their lives they would experience on “the other shore.” Using the well-known correspondence between water and truths, we can recognize what appeared to be a conflict between the eternal role of the disciples’ calling, and the chaos of fear and doubt they experienced during the crossing episode, — two planes. We too often find ourselves “at sea” in some of the institutions and customs that we have cobbled together, to transport us on and across the “truths” as we understand them. We also feel unprepared when an unseen presence “on the face of the waters” heaps them up into violent but temporary waves capable of destroying much that is old and familiar. It does not take a “rocket scientist” to find an analogy with our present fears and doubts, while astounding advances in technology, transportation and communication threaten much that is familiar to us.

It requires, then, a firm focus on the eternal aspect of each temporal frame of our personal life journey, to allow us to see the Lord coming to us firmly supported by the waves of information that otherwise threaten to overwhelm us. Rev. Cole mentions in his sermon that “the Lord in the ultimate [in] the particularities is the meaning of ‘the sea’”. Thus we have to rely on the Lord when we have temptations, but this is not to obliterate our courage. Rev. Cole speaks about our needing to take risks in order to move forward.

“Moving forward” requires looking for “what yearns to be born.” Although it is not true that men cannot focus on what is yearning to be born (an outstanding example is Swedenborg’s vision of the descent of the New Jerusalem), focusing on what is yearning to be born may well be easier for a woman. It comes to her naturally through the experience of labor. Psychologically, too, this may be easier for her, because of her reported greater ease in being able to tolerate and contain the conflicting elements in particularities. In *Woman’s Way of Knowing* we read, “Women constructionists show a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity. They abandon completely the either/or so common to the previous position described [that one size and shape of a “truth” fits all persons and situations at all times.] ‘They recognize the inevitability of conflict and stress and although they may hope to achieve some respite, they also learn to live with conflict rather than talking or acting it away.’ They no longer want to suppress or deny aspects of the self in order to avoid conflict or simplify their lives....These women want to embrace all the pieces of the self in some ultimate sense of the whole — daughter, friend, mother, lover, nurturer, thinker, artist, advocate. They want to avoid what they perceive to be a shortcoming in many men—the tendency to compartmentalize thought and feeling, home and work, self and other. In women, there is an impetus to try to deal with life, internal and external,

in all its complexity” (Belenky, M; Clinchy, B; Goldberger, N; Tarule, J., Basic Books, New York, 1969, p.139).

The mythological motif regarding woman’s concern with, and involvement in, what is yearning to be born gives credence to the concept that this is her sacred responsibility, particularly at times when there is a shift in the plane of learning, regarding birth of vegetation gods and, on a higher plane, the personal quest of the knight in search of the Holy Grail (see Jesse Weston’s *Ritual to Romance*, Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1957, p.49). In the Gospels, also, women are depicted in times of a shift in planes of spiritual learning.

Within their marriage, a man and a woman need to keep the focus on the Lord in the particularities of each day’s journey together and to look conjointly for their meaning on a spiritual level. Although individuals may be able to acquire this skill by themselves it is likely that they will benefit from the perspective of their spouse who enters any situation from a slightly different angle,—especially when there appears to be a conflict between temporal winds of change and the eternal aspects of some new thing that is yearning to be born. A conjoint view may reveal that certain temporal elements of their present situation are not yet ready for change, even though we have completed our interior preparation and feel ready for a new call. Here, patience and courage are more appropriate than fear and trembling.