

A Pathway for All

A talk delivered by Ann M. Van Tassel, C.S. at the Forty Sixth Annual Meeting of the Committee for Institutional Work in Texas held on October 14, 2006 at Seventh Church of Christ, Scientist, Houston, Texas.

Thank you all so much for inviting me to speak today. I am so grateful to be here to share in our love of institutional work for this great state of Texas. What an opportunity this meeting is for us to come together from all over the state to share the fruitage of our work and to look at the Word of God in a new light that we can take back with us to our communities to better practice Christian Science healing.

Well, thinking about looking at the Word in a new light made me think about my Sunday School class. This past year it has been my privilege to teach the five and six year olds. I wanted to teach them a little of what I had been learning about living in God's day. So, I adapted an analogy that was simple, but as we used it in Sunday School, developing it a little more each week, I found it to be a powerful tool, not only as a teaching device, but also as a way for me to think about my own experiences. I also discovered that this little analogy was mentioned either directly or indirectly in almost every single weekly Bible lesson. I call it the lesson of the path.

In the lesson of the path the student wakes up in the morning and starts thinking as soon as possible about the fact that this is God's day as it tells us in Psalms (Ps 118:24) - **This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.** I tell my students that when we establish the day as God's day, created and maintained by Him, then we know that the day can only contain the elements of God, Spirit, or good. This goodness is the only thing that can unfold to us as our day progresses. If this is God's day then we also know that it cannot contain any elements of error or evil opposed to God and therefore opposed to us as God's children. Knowing this is a guide and a protection to us as we go down the pathway of our day.

In Sunday School I draw this on a piece of paper by starting at the top and drawing a sun with the words "God's Day". Then I draw two lines down the center of the paper to represent a path. The idea is to stay on the path until you get to the end of the day which is represented by a setting sun, beside which I write "Thank you God".

Three simple rules – establishing our day, from the start, in God, good; staying with the good as our guide down the path of our day; and expressing gratitude for all the good we can discern. Three very simple rules but I found that as I consistently put the lesson of the path into my day, my life was significantly changed. For one thing I was definitely experiencing more harmony in my life. Looking at the day from the perspective of an unfoldment of an already established and complete day of God certainly made me less apprehensive about how the day was going to turn out. Sticking with God's day I already knew how it was going to turn out – good.

So these three simple rules are the basis of the lesson about the path, but there's more. For example, in Sunday School we learn not to take winding trails that lead us off the path, trails that lead to beliefs in sickness, sin or death. This is all well and good for the children, but what about us and our Institutional work? Can we apply the lessons of the path to that? I certainly hope so because in our work for the institutions aren't we faced with all that error has to offer about the human condition? How can we stay on the path and yet do our work?

Should we stay on the path? Maybe we should leave the path and go down these winding trails of sin, sickness and death to reach those that are institutionalized, in order to bring them back to the path. Is this what we are doing when we go into these Institutions, leaving the path and going down the trails? We shouldn't be, not if we want to be effective healers.

Leaving the path would involve the belief that there is something other than the path itself. If God created the pathway or goodness, he could not create anything that would not be

good. He could not create anything that was the opposite of Himself, anything that would be off the path, anything evil.

The truth is that the path is all that exists. The winding trails are mirages, places that seem to be but are not. We know that a mirage is an illusion that reflects something real but in a misty, distorted sort of way and it puts the reflection in a different place than the original - away, over there, off in the distance. In the same way the people that appear to us to be institutionalized are actually appearing to us in this mirage sort of state. These people are, in truth, on the path with us but their image is being distorted and they to appear to be in a state that is far away from us.

This is good news because we don't have to go off the path to save these people. There isn't anything we have to fix about these people to bring them back with us to the path. But, what we do have to do is stand out ground. We have to stand our ground on the path and see the mirage for what it is, an illusion. We all know from our own experiences that when we replace the illusion with the truth that the mist disappears. We call this healing.

The truth is we are all on the path, our Christian Science Institutional workers, as well as everyone else working in the institutions, as are those who believe in their institutionalized state. Our work has always been to stay on the path and to see that everyone else is on the path – created by God, perfect in God, loved, guided, maintained, complete, and established on the path. This is the institutional work we do whether we're inside or outside an institution.

It struck me as funny that while Peter and Paul and Silas were trying to get out of the prisons, we're trying to get into them. But, no matter whether we're in or out of any institution our work is still effective. As a matter of fact we know that our work in Christian Science is the only thing that can be effective. This is simply Science.

Anyone of us who have worked with any institution for any amount of time has seen that the belief in a limited human life or condition leads only to disintegration, to discord and death, not to true healing. Our work then in the institutions is essential, because it brings the essential elements of healing. I know this for a fact from an experience I had many years ago.

I accepted the assignment from our church's Institutional Committee of working in a county facility that housed youthful offenders. The offences ranged from truancy to auto theft and the offenders, the children, ranged between the ages of eleven and seventeen. I had extensive training preparing me to go into the facility but nothing prepared me for what I would find in there.

It's difficult for me to describe the shock and confusion I felt after I started working in the facility because it wasn't over the types of things I thought I would have trouble with. I knew that it would be difficult for me to see innocent children involved in serious crimes but I found that we rarely talked about the crime and the children behave pretty much like children do.

I knew I was a small town girl who had never been near any kind of detention center so all my mental images were in fact produced by television scenes. I was concerned about my safety and about doing something wrong, but I found I was concerned about the wrong things.

What shocked me was what the children said to me, and I don't mean that they were using shock language or were disrespectful. On the contrary, it was a privilege to talk with us so they all worked extra hard to be polite. What I was shocked about was the fact that these children were growing up with absolutely no moral training. They literally had no idea why anything they had done was wrong. They had never heard about the Ten Commandment or the Golden Rule. They didn't know why it was wrong to steal from people who obviously had too much, or why it was wrong for them to sell drugs so they could buy clothes and toys for their babies.

At first I thought they were joking or just trying to give me a hard time, but when I faced the same situation in every discussion I had with them I finally came around to the truth of the

situation – these children simply had no moral basis and a lot of them were simply trying to survive.

Did I mention my small town upbringing? In the town I grew up in there were less than ten thousand people and we had twenty two churches. I think it was impossible for anyone in that town to grow up without a religious upbringing of some sort. I'll admit that up until I started working at this facility it had never occurred to me that people could be raised without knowing the basic rules about a functioning society.

I knew I was naïve going in, but I was completely unprepared. I felt that I had no basis to even start a conversation with the children, let alone teach them anything. The chaplain we were working under had told us it was a hopeless situation. The rate of recidivism was very high much closer to one hundred percent than fifty percent and I couldn't even argue with why the children would want to return to such a facility where at least their basic needs would be met. But yet I knew this wasn't right.

I had no idea what to do so I did the only thing I could think of – I stayed on the path. I prayed hard for myself at first. I prayed hard to know that I was on the path, that I was created by God, that I was cared for and maintained by God. When I could feel this for myself then I could know it about the children and about everybody connected with this facility, because I knew we were all God's children. I thought about it when I was at home, when I went to the facility and every minute I was with the children. I felt I was doing this out of desperation because I felt totally inadequate to handle the situation in any other way.

But this desperate prayer was "indeed adequate" as Mrs. Eddy tells us in Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, "The power of Christian Science and divine Love is omnipotent. It is indeed adequate to unclasp the hold and to destroy disease, sin, and death." After working there for more than a year the chaplain told us one day that a very curious thing had happened. The rate of recidivism had diminished almost to zero. In fact, only two boys in that year had returned out of all the children released. This had never happened before in the history of the facility.

The chaplain felt very strongly that the change could be attributed to us, the Christian Science institutional workers, although he couldn't see anything that we were doing differently than any number of people had done in the past. But, I knew what the difference was. It wasn't necessarily anything we were doing at the facility; it was what we were knowing about the truth. It was a complete reliance on the truth of being in contrast to what we were seeing in the facility. It was a complete reliance on God, instead of human ability.

As it turns out I didn't have to leave the path in search of a way to help these children. I had to stay on it and see that they were right beside me completely untouched by any human circumstances.

I know why we do Institutional work. It's because we can't help it. We love God so much that we can't help but correct anything that presents itself to us that is un-God like. We are the children of God and therefore we pray to our Father/Mother, God and when we pray to God, Mrs. Eddy tells us in No and Yes that "Prayer begets an awakened desire to be and do good." Because, she tells us in the same paragraph, that "True prayer is not asking God for love, it is learning to love, and to include all mankind in one affection. Prayer is the utilization of the love wherewith He loves us." So that's it. We were made to do Institutional work. It's in our very nature.