

Douglas Steere *speaks*

To a remarkable degree Douglas Steere has exemplified in his life the two dominant concerns about which he has spoken and written so widely and so well. One is the nurturing of the spiritual life of individuals and groups. The other is the translation of the life of the spirit into social action.

Born in Michigan in 1901, Douglas Steere attended public schools there and went on to earn degrees from Michigan State University, Harvard University, and Oxford University—which he attended as a Rhodes Scholar.

In his early thirties he joined the Religious Society of Friends and since that time he has been one of its most active members and most able interpreters. He and his wife Dorothy have gone on many missions for the American Friends Service Committee and for other Quaker organizations. For six years he was chairman of the Friends World Committee for Consultation.

But his influence has been felt far beyond Quaker circles, especially as a teacher of philosophy at Haverford College, as a lecturer in many colleges and universities, as a leader of religious retreats, and as a writer. In recent years he has been active in the ecumenical movement, serving as an observer at the Vatican Council II and organizing and taking part in colloquia between Buddhists and Christians in Japan, and Hindus and Christians in India.

Among his many books are *Prayer and Worship*, *On Beginning from Within*, *On Listening to Another*, *Doors Into Life*, and *Work and Contemplation*. His Pendle Hill pamphlets include *On Being Present Where You Are*, *The Hardest Journey*, *Mutual Irradiation: A Quaker View of Ecumenism*, and *Contemplation and Leisure*.

Readers should be enriched by the following excerpts from his writings as he speaks:

ON CONTEMPLATION AND LEISURE . . .

"Curiously enough, each of us has a philosopher, a contemplator if you like, within us. It is a gift that is not optional but that is built-in equipment."

"True leisure is to be found only in a certain temper of the human spirit. It is a quality of inner spaciousness, of inner receptivity, and of inward collectedness."

"True leisure . . . may be experienced in the thick of heavy responsibility. It is not necessarily found in those who teach philosophy, or confined to any occupation, or to those who are completely free of designated work. It is not reserved for youth or for the venerable. It may be present in monasteries or may live in families. In spite of Thoreau and John Muir, it is not given only to country-dwellers and denied to urban man. It is rather a quality of approach to any situation, an inwardly spacious way of being open and present where you are."

"We . . . might find some help in defining contemplation if we put it in terms of a sustained scrutiny for meaning."

"It is perfectly clear that some practices and some cultures do encourage it and that others are given to its neglect. Yet the spirit of man is such that no culture or society is ever without some persons and usually some cultural islands where inhabitants have made and are making these discoveries and who continue to keep these options open to us all."

"True leisure and true contemplation on all its levels is a condition of the human spirit that needs no social justification for its practice. Yet it is hard to see how one could exaggerate the human stakes that are involved in its return to strength in our time."

ON BEING PRESENT WHERE YOU ARE . . .

"To be present, then, can on one level mean to be locatable at a given point in space and time. But two persons (even two married persons) or two races or two religions or two cultures can live in precisely the same place and at the very same moment and yet can brush each other with no more understanding of each other or effect on each other than what Dr. Jacques Cuttat calls 'a dialogue of deafs.' "

"In the matter of persons, then, if we were to attempt to characterize this further dimension of presence that goes beyond locability, we should have to speak of its posture as a readiness to respect and to stand in wonder and openness before the mysterious life and influence of the other. It means, to be sure, a power to influence, to penetrate, to engage with the other, but it means equally a willingness to be vulnerable enough to be influenced by, to be penetrated by, and even to be changed by the experience. If this is an accurate account of what actually takes place on the deepest levels of love and of friendship, it also means that out of the long loneliness of life there are possible some luminous moments of profound communion, of truly coming into the presence of the other. And when they do come, all efforts to measure their worth seem superfluous."

"Presence may also come in an act of prayer."

"In all these areas: personal, ecumenical, educational, racial, political—to be present, really present, is to be vulnerable, to be able to be hurt. And when pain is in prospect, it is so much easier to be elsewhere than where we are. . . . but it is also to be awake, alive, and engaged actively in the immediate assignment that has been laid upon us."

ON THE POWER OF PRAYER . . .

" 'To come near to God is to change' is a cryptic Christian statement of a great truth. And the most open and vulnerable way at man's disposal to 'come near to God' is prayer."

"The first rule in prayer . . . is that you have to want mightily to pray, and that, if that want is mighty enough, you will be present, really present, where you are. . . . This does not mean that you have to be in a given room, at a given time, in a given posture. It does mean that you have to care enough about this placing of yourself in an act of absolute reciprocity to the Divine that what is at the heart of things may take possession of you, mind, heart, and will. You have to care enough so that you will collect yourself, move back into your soul from the distant suburbs where much of life tends to be spent, and honestly be there."

"The adoration of God in prayer is a mixture of gratitude and reverence and awe. It is not only gratitude for his gifts but for himself, for his constancy, for the unplumbable mystery of his being that seems always to haunt the countless expressions of his intimate concern."

"Prayer is often defined as speech with God. It may begin that way. But prayer of a high order rarely stops there. Real prayer is more nearly work with God."

"Always in authentic Christian prayer, self-giving increases."

"If we love God, if we acknowledge to whom we belong, if, in the intervals of other tasks, this love moves naturally to the surface and gives a glow to all we do, this is prayer without ceasing, perpetual prayer."

ON CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP . . .

"... the real enemy of the Christian fellowship is itself. It is the low level of mediocrity of devotion with which the majority of Christians are content. The Christian fellowship is 'not Christian enough.' "

ON CORPORATE WORSHIP . . .

"We need corporate encouragement to recall and be re-dedicated to that deep citizenship to which our lives stand pledged."

"The regular participation in corporate worship nurtures the tender insight of private prayer and helps to give it a stalk, a stem, a root, and soil in which to grow."

"A service of corporate worship is for those who are weary and heavy laden. It is for sinners, for apprentices and journeymen, as well as master workmen, and what we begin with does not matter. What matters is, are we brought to such a focus of attention that our claimful cares are made aware of being petty chatterers in the presence of the patient Listener? What matters is, does this awareness of the Listener change their course, re-order them, drop them into the background, and finally reduce them to silence as the worshipper becomes still enough to hear God speak?"

"And finally, does the service of worship, having silenced the worshipper's cares, searched out and purified his frailties, encouraged the enjoyment and adoration of God, does it bring the worshipper to listen with his whole being for the word that may speak out the meaning of his present experience, for the divine accent or the holding back on his inward leading, for the sense of quickened responsibility for his fellows and for 'thy kingdom come on earth?' "

ON THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS . . .

"I think that I feel more acutely aware than I ever have before that Quakers are really a third-force, that they are not Roman Catholics nor classical Protestants nor simply prophetic left-wing Puritans. Historically they have and still do when they are in the life, witness to an underground stream of life and power in the spirit that was in Christ and has been known in every succeeding generation."

"The witness of the Society of Friends has always been to the fact that the apostolic period of the Christian witness has never stopped; that the epoch of the Holy Spirit is upon us; and that the revelation of the power of the Spirit which the Book of Acts records is in full surge. It is class-blind and color-blind and age-blind, and it comes to the plain man as well as to the genius; and given a yielding, will pour through the lives of ordinary lay men and women and through its power will release them for hallowed service in the fabric of the world."

"... it is when we are anchored in Meetings (no matter what the style of our worship may be) where pure fellowship and common life is deep and sustaining, where we are known in our weaknesses and our strengths and are still loved and held up by our fellows, where our worship is centered around the transforming power of the Spirit that Jesus promised would invade us, melt us down, renew us, and send us out again—that we find the powerhouse that is alone adequate to support our outward testimonies."

"... without the continuous practice of prayer and confrontation of the Bible there will be no lasting discipleship, no lasting Christian witness to either history or the secular process."

ON ECUMENISM AS MUTUAL IRRADIATION . . .

"We can define 'ecumenical' as simply world-embracing. But deeper meanings have been distilling themselves into this word until now we can fairly say that an ecumenical encounter points toward an attempt to understand; an attempt at shaking off the stereotype with which we have approached another's religion and moving from the shadow to the substance; of opening ourselves to the truth in another's religious approach; and becoming vulnerable to the point where we may not return to our own faith in the same condition that we set out."

". . . a true ecumenism creates a situation where each religious group feels concern for the outcome of its fellow religionist's situation and can rejoice and find itself enriched when it produces an unmistakable saint, or a groundswell of holiness, and can feel as equally involved in its misfortunes and say, not 'There but for the grace of God go I,' but rather, 'There go I.' "

"My own notion of the current implementing of this vision is a functional ecumenism that begins with all of us encouraging each other to practice our religious tradition to the hilt and to share our experiences with each other in every creative way we can devise."

"Ecumenism does not transform. God transforms. But this closer exposure to the religious life of our fellows, which ecumenism encourages, is a powerful agency for bringing about that inner openness to life into which the all-loving One is bidding us all. To turn our backs upon it may be to turn our backs upon His invitation to our time."

"This kind of daring ecumenical approach requires a climate of confidence that is highly exacting. . . ."

ON THE TRAGEDY OF THE UNUSED LIFE . . .

"But there can be no depicting the hardness of the journey inward if we neglect to mention the unused life in each of us which in a very special way the stillness in God's presence, the enjoyment of God, begins to draw out of us again. For we carry within us all of the unwritten poems, the unpainted pictures, the unwritten letters, the unheeded love of nature around us, the unwritten books, the unreconciled hardenings toward people, the new levels of tenderness we have meant to lavish on our wives and husbands and children, and our neighbors."

"Real caring is costly in time and in involvement, and wittingly or unwittingly, how often we are not there."

"If there is a single phrase that can mark the inward and the outward journey in this epoch of the Holy Spirit . . . it is that we are lent to be spent."

"God has all the time in the world, and has great patience with the little things with which we often shyly begin."

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