



The diving

BY RON BALLARD

MANY PEOPLE feel excluded at some time in life. Sometimes it's due to discrimination—by race, gender, age, religion, peer group, social status. Other times, people may feel that good is just not coming to them the way it is to others.

No matter what form exclusion takes, it's pretty demoralizing to feel left out. Fundamentally, everyone has a right to feel included, to belong and be respected, and many cultures recognize that basic right. But to say it is a right, and actually to experience it, are two different things. Even if a nation establishes constitutional rights to inclusion, it's no guarantee that everyone is going to experience the benefits equally.

Is there a platform for truly inalienable rights, other than just human codes, no matter how well-intentioned these codes may be? I've always valued a statement in *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by the reformer and author Mary Baker Eddy: "God has built a higher platform of human rights, and He has built it on diviner claims. These claims are not made through code or creed, but in demonstration of 'on earth peace, good-will toward men.' Human codes, scholastic theology, material medicine and hygiene, fetter faith and spiritual understanding. Divine Science rends asunder these fetters, and man's birthright of sole allegiance to his Maker asserts itself" (p. 226).

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right to be included

That passage, “man’s birthright of sole allegiance to his Maker,” is, in my view, a mighty antidote to the pain of exclusion. For one thing, it establishes the fact that a person’s real allegiance is to God. And it implies the Creator’s linkage to us, His creation. No one is left out of God’s love for His children. No matter how harsh the experiences of exclusion may be, a remedy lies in the recognition that God is committed to us—to our welfare, happiness, and fulfillment.

Growing up, I tried to live in ways that I felt were important to finding success and harmony. The standards I set for myself stressed the significance of cultivating and relying on spiritual rather than material approaches to gaining satisfaction, and they did help me gain the control I sought in my life through looking within—to spiritual resources—rather than seeking something outside myself for ultimate happiness. But my choices did not always put me in sync with my friends.

Sometimes, for example, I was excluded from friendship or opportunities because I didn’t drink and get high. This became particularly true when I entered college and had to make friends with an entirely different group from the people I grew up with.

Much of the downtime in college was spent partying, and that usually included drinking, getting high, and recreational sex. None of those elements of socializing particularly interested me. But having a good time with my friends—and being included in their lives and accepted by them—did. As people got to know me, they excluded me from activities because I didn’t fit in. Not fit-

ting in with commonly accepted norms in society is what most exclusion is about.

I thought a lot about where my allegiance was in those situations, and I came to a rather surprising conclusion. At first, I’d taken solace in the idea that my allegiance was to God, and that “I really didn’t need those kinds of friends.” But I soon realized that was a self-righteous position to take. In essence I was saying, “I am with God, and they are not,” and that only resulted in self-exclusion.

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The fact is, God, the divine Love and Principle of all life, cares for everyone, including people we may feel are not being very fair or caring. That doesn’t mean that God supports what is unfair or unjust. But it does mean that those practices cannot separate God from any of us. God knows only our real identity, an identity that includes and expresses His/Her very qualities and attributes. And this concept—that God knows us from a higher standpoint, beyond any human perspective—can be the very fact that ends exclusion.

I started including my would-be

friends in this kind of spiritual outlook. Rather than seeing them as flawed because they didn’t make the same choices for themselves as I made for myself, I needed to appreciate how they expressed God’s nature, and really cherish in each one of them their spiritual integrity and natural allegiance to God. As I did this, I was included more in their lives. I was invited to many more activities, and to most parties. I didn’t feel that I had to accept every invitation, but when I did go, I found I could have a good time and still live my own life. Soon, this outlook opened up some pretty interesting conversations about what I believed and the rights of conscience.

That experience proved to me that there is a more important choice to be made than just whether one human perspective is better than another. The more important choice is whether we’re willing to go beyond the purely human view of others and see something more spiritual, more divine, more connected with God.

Today, my spiritual healing practice is based in San Francisco, and I’ve been part of many discussions about civil rights, theological attitudes, political power, as well as the moral underpinnings of different sexual lifestyles. As significant as all those issues are to day-to-day life in a community, I’ve learned that there is a more salient issue that really supercedes all the haggling—the divine right of *inclusion*.

Centuries ago, the Apostle Peter had a “rooftop experience,” as he wrestled with the issues of exclusion and inclusion. As he prayed, Peter was shown by God that he should call no one common or unclean (see Acts 10). This was a big step for a

THE DIVINE RIGHT . . .

continued from page 7

Jew, who, by tradition, was not supposed to keep company with a person from another nation. But Peter realized that the message was not simply to accept everything without discrimination, but rather to accept everyone from a more spiritual viewpoint.

The great advantage in approaching things from a spiritual perspective is that this attitude allows for natural development and growth. And we all have a lot of growing to do. What better way to do it than within the atmosphere of mutual acceptance, rather than of criticism!

This is not to say that people don't have issues that they want to face in the realm of lifestyle. For example, what really defines their identity? Do they really want to be defined as mainly a sexual entity?

I've worked with many men and women who have gotten to the point of feeling that viewing themselves as primarily a sexual being is not all that fulfilling. That view is based on the premise that the gratification of the physical senses is the highest fulfillment obtainable. Many people I've talked with have come to feel that this premise simply isn't true. For all that it promised, it delivered relatively little. And often they've come to that conclusion through trial and error, not theory.

It is through the spiritual senses that people find really satisfying meaning in life. These spiritual senses include intuition, perception, comprehension, understanding, and discernment. Using spiritual sense quite often requires getting beyond selfish interests and showing concern for another's spiritual development, advancement, and progress.

People need patience with one another as they seek better definitions of who they are. Patience does not mean acquiescence to someone else's choice or behavior, but it does involve an absolute confidence that

God, the Soul of us all, is now at work in everyone's life, pointing out and nurturing the elements of integrity, understanding, purity, and strength. We can trust that God is in control of His creation and will always move us in righteous paths.

St. Paul uttered a remarkable premise of inclusion: "There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . bond nor free . . . male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Maybe a lot of us feel we still have quite a ways to go in gaining the spirit of this statement.

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On the other hand, there is in Christian Science an explanation of divine law that shows how to demonstrate spiritual inclusion in practical ways. Mary Baker Eddy rediscovered the divine laws of healing that Jesus relied on. She saw that it was his ability to see God's own likeness in others that blessed them. Her discovery offers a method for living Paul's sentiments—based on the inclusive nature of God's love. No matter how one may define oneself, there is still a spiritual perspective to be grasped and lived. And whether we think of ourselves, figuratively speaking, as male or female, slave or free, we are all one in Christ, the divine or spiritual identity of each one of us.

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What about those differences in our lives? Well, the surest road to healing is spiritual recognition and acceptance—the process of identifying in others the qualities, attributes, characteristics, of God, rather than seeing in someone just his or her human personality. It's a matter of going deeper and looking for what is spiritual, which actually constitutes one's true identity.

Jesus chose to ignore the fact that the Jews were supposed to have nothing to do with strangers, and brought healing to a Canaanite woman's child, as well as to a distressed Samaritan woman he met. He ignored popular theories about touching lepers, eating with people seen as sinners, and socializing with despised tax collectors. To him, those were not the issues that defined these individuals. Their spiritual selfhood in God actually defined them. And that's why Jesus' teachings excluded no one.

God fully sustains and supports each individual's real nature, and "... Love supports the struggling heart until it ceases to sigh over the world ..." (*Science and Health*, p. 57). To someone who feels excluded, there is one great fact that trumps all other factors when it is allowed to take possession of his or her thought: We are greatly loved by God. And there is nothing that can stand in resistance to His great love. ✧



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