

THE ANGLE

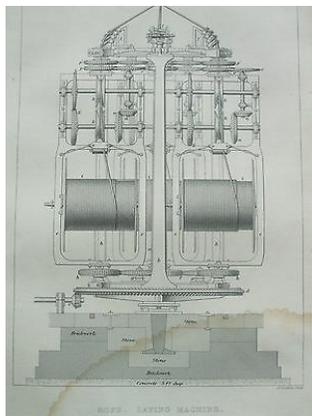
October
2019

The Way of Love - Learning

At the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Austin in the summer of 2018, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry offered his vision of a Jesus-centered life, which he “packaged” as the Way of Love. It has seven stages – Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest. Last month I offered some thoughts about the first part – Turn. This month, we continue with Learn.

There is a tendency to think of learning as something that we do in preparation to do something else. We gather skills or knowledge, then the learning ends and we go out and do

whatever it is we have been taught. And although we may not be producing anything of value while we learn, so the thinking goes, our future productivity will make up for it. Learning is a necessary evil in a world of bottom lines.

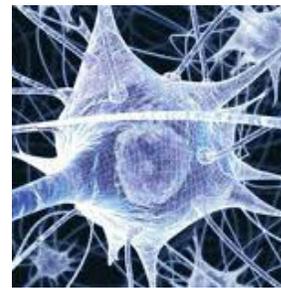


But that may not be the only way to think about learning, especially in a spiritual context. Another approach comes from an unlikely source. In 1950, Alan Turing, the legendary genius of early computing, published a paper in which he wondered whether instead of asking “Can machines think?” we should be asking “Can machines do what we (as thinking beings) can do?” A major part of what he



meant by “what we can do” is learn. This gave birth to the field of machine learning.

The full range of meanings that that term may take on is beyond the scope of what I want to say here – and, to be honest, beyond my limited



understanding. Suffice to say that ways have been developed for machines to get better at doing tasks by doing them, checking the results they get, and adjusting as needed. They learn in the course of doing.

Implicit in this sort of learning is the assumption that it may not be possible to be fully competent using only what is learned beforehand (by programming in the case of computers). Something original and otherwise unobtainable is produced only by doing.

Translated into the language of Christian love, this means that learning how to love – God, our neighbors, ourselves – happens as we engage in that love in practice. The reading, studying, praying, and other preparation we do is valuable too, but a space is made for the



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Holy Spirit to expand our love beyond our “book learning” whenever we enact it in the world.

It isn't hard to see that this vision of learning by loving (and loving by learning) will, at times, lead to mistakes and miscalculations. The maxim “fail cheap, fast, and often” (attributed to many modern experts in business and “life philosophy”) comes to mind. But the raw materials of loving are hearts and minds, not the bits and bytes of computers. Our loving will sometimes wound, a fact that makes repentance and reconciliation important parts of the learning process.



Despite the risks, this vision of learning by doing strikes me as a necessary elaboration on the Way of Love. Although every step – Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest – is active in its own way, those that are arguably the most outward-looking come only late in the cycle. For me at least, moving doing closer to the head of the line makes the whole exercise more alive.

Blessings

Howie+

Five-Minute Devotional

The Subway, by Abbé Michel Quoist

The last one squeezes in.

The door rolls shut.

The subway rumbles off.

I can't move;

I am no longer an individual but a crowd,

A crowd that moves in one piece like jellied soup in its can.

A nameless and indifferent crowd, probably far from you, Lord.

I am one with the crowd, and I see why it's sometimes hard for me to rise higher.

This crowd is heavy—leaden soles on my feet, my slow feet—a crowd too large for my overburdened skiff.

Yet, Lord, I have no right to overlook these people; they are my brothers.

And I cannot save myself, alone.

Lord, since you wish it, I shall head for heaven “in the subway.”



In 21st Century America, almost all of our associations are discretionary. We choose the people we meet by where we live, the work we do, and where and how we spend our leisure time. The danger in this is that we can come to value others mainly for the ways they meet our needs – for reassurance that we are beautiful and successful and popular enough.

But how often do we allow ourselves to imagine that we might need others for the sake of our sanctification? In one of the ceremonies of the Journey to Adulthood Christian education program, 13-year-old “celebrities” are asked how they will make their way in the Christian life. They respond, “We will go together.”

Again and again, we are told that Jesus had compassion on the crowds, those collections of families, friends, neighbors, and strangers who came together simply to be near him. And yet, of necessity they were also near to one another, and their experience of the grace and mercy of God as revealed in Jesus was colored and shaped by the presence of all the others.

Our presence in the crowd does more than knock the rough edges off our faith. It molds us as children of God living among many others who

are blessed in the same way. The divine spark in each inspires us. The struggles of each summon up our compassion. In short, we are more Christ-like in the crowd than we could ever be alone.

October Saints

1 Thérèse	Patron of: Florists, pilots and air crews
2 Leger	Sore eyes
3 Dionysios the Areopagite	Protection against the devil
4 Francis	Animals, tapestry workers, Protection against fire
6 Bruno	Possessed people
Faith	Pilgrims, prisoners
8 Pelagia	Actresses
9 Andronicus	Silversmiths
Denis of Paris	Protection against frenzy
10 Gereon	Protection against migraines
11 Gummarus	Unhappy Marriage
Canice	Protection against shipwrecks

Saint Canice was an Irish abbot, monastic founder, priest and missionary during the early medieval period. He is thought of as one of the "Twelve Apostles of Ireland" and preached Christianity across Ireland and to the Picts in Scotland. He is the patron of protection against shipwreck because by tradition when he sailed from Ireland to Scotland to meet Saint Columba, his crossing was smooth despite rough seas.

14 Callixtus	Cemetery workers
Angadrismia of Beauvais	Protection against slander
15 Teresa of Avila	Lace makers
16 Marguerite d'Youville	Troublesome in-laws
Gall	Poultry
17 Ignatius of Antioch	Protection against throat diseases

18 Luke	Artists, Physicians
21 Ursula	Teachers
23 John of Capistrano	Lawyers, judges
25 Crispin and Crispian	Shoemakers
28 Jude	Desperate Cases
Simon	Lumberjacks
29 Narcissus of Jerusalem	Protection against insect bites
30 Marcellus the Centurion	Conscientious objectors

By tradition, Saint Marcellus was a centurion stationed at Tingis (modern-day Tangiers) who refused to participate in the general birthday celebrations of the Emperor Maximian, which would have entailed sacrifice to the Roman gods. He threw off his military belt, weapons, and vine staff (the insignia of his rank), and was soon brought before a judge named Fortunatus. The judge remanded the saint to lay his case before Maximian and Constantius; the latter was friendly to Christians. However, Marcellus was taken to the deputy Praetorian prefect Aurelius Agricolanus instead. Marcellus pleaded guilty to repudiating his allegiance to an earthly leader, and was martyred.

31 Foillan of Fosses	Dentists, truss makers
Quentin	Coughs