

In the Presence of the Lord

Excerpts from a talk given at Arden Wood's 2011 Annual Meeting

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It's a tremendous honor to be here to share this time with you all. When I was told that the theme for this year's meeting was "Celebrating a Year of Renewal and Healing," my first thought was, "Just the one?"...because I have the sneaking suspicion that healing and renewal have been going on at Arden Wood for more than a year. In fact, it's pretty well documented that healing and renewal have been going on here since it opened its doors in 1930!

Then the last sentence of Mrs. Eddy's definition of "year" came to thought: "Eternity is God's measurement of Soul-filled years."¹ And Arden Wood certainly stands for the eternal newness of God's man, standing whole, upright and free, and forever seen in fresh, original, brilliant lights.

Moreover, one of Mrs. Eddy's definitions of "year" is: "space for repentance."² The word "repentance" usually—and legitimately—applies to changing our thinking from sense to Soul, from sin to holiness. But it doesn't seem illegitimate to apply the word in the sense of "re-thinking"—of seeing a right idea in fresh ways.

That's what struck me yesterday as I toured Arden Wood for the first time. I learned that both Henry Gutterson, the architect, and Vernita Seeley, the original decorator, had sought to bring a sense of light to the building amid San Francisco's frequent clouds. It's apparent that the successive administrations of Arden Wood have done a beautiful job of nurturing that theme—of finding unique ways to reveal that light bursting forth from the clouds both humanly and metaphysically to

yesterday's, today's, and tomorrow's guests, staff and visitors.

Seeing these lovely grounds and meeting the exceptional nurses and staff for the first time, I can easily see what a recent speaker at Arden Wood meant when she said, "Thank you for providing the means whereby those in need of healing or rest ...never have to depart from the environment of Christian Science."³

And it's true: those who seek refuge at our Christian Science nursing facilities do find themselves "hid with Christ in God,"⁴ safe in the pure thought of the nurses, administrators and staff, surrounded by the quiet, supportive atmosphere which can be such a tremendous

aid in calming their own thought, turning away from the body, and being present with the Lord. Certainly, it's easy to feel present with the Lord at Arden Wood!

Being present with the Lord is one way to describe healing—for in the Lord's presence, there is no room for sin, sickness, disease or evil of any kind. Now, we know we don't need to travel to a material place to be present with the Lord, for our loving Father-Mother is already everywhere. Yet we have two biblical examples of children being brought to the Lord's temple to be presented to Him. The first child is Samuel, whose mother, Hannah, brings him to "the house of the Lord in Shiloh"⁵ for the purpose of dedicating him to the service of the Lord. History tells us that Shiloh was a political and religious center of Israel for many years prior to King David's establishment of his monarchy in Jerusalem. Shiloh was the central seat of the



priesthood, and the tabernacle of the Lord was set up there prior to its relocation to Jerusalem.

The second example was, of course, Jesus. According to the book of Luke, Joseph and Mary bring Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, to dedicate him to the service of God. Both Samuel and Jesus were presented to the Lord in the “Jerusalem” of his respective time. But the question is, why did they need to be “presented” to God? God is everywhere. Why the need to travel to Jerusalem?

Materially speaking, there was no need, other than the fulfillment of the religious and cultural expectations of the time. As interesting as the historical record of Jewish culture, beliefs and practice may be, Mrs. Eddy points out in that passage so familiar to us all, “The heavenly intent of earth’s shadows is to chasten the affections, to rebuke human consciousness and turn it gladly from a material, false sense of life and happiness, to spiritual joy and true estimate of being.”⁶ So what affections are chastened when we spiritually view the stories of these children’s presentation to the Lord in the temple in the holy city? To what spiritual joy and true estimate of being do the stories guide us? One purpose of these stories might be to instruct us to present ourselves to the Lord in the temple.

Fortunately, we don’t have to travel to the modern city of Jerusalem to do this. We can do it right where we are—and Arden Wood certainly provides a supportive atmosphere for this. We don’t have to travel because Mrs. Eddy has defined “Temple” for us as, “Body; the idea of Life, substance, and intelligence; the superstructure of Truth; the shrine of Love...”⁷

Presenting ourselves to the Lord in the temple requires that we gain a higher sense of body. Where do we go looking for this higher sense? In Jerusalem—of which the higher definition is, according to Mrs. Eddy, “Home, heaven.”⁸ And “Heaven,” of course, is “Harmony; the reign of Spirit; government by divine Principle; spirituality; bliss; the atmosphere of Soul.”⁹

This is actually a pretty radical definition of heaven. Unlike the more standard theological definitions of heaven, which often simply fill the afterlife with the more innocent material pleasures, Mrs. Eddy’s definition excludes all materialism and materiality.

It finds joy, fulfillment, happiness, usefulness, employment, activity, and being wholly in Spirit, Love.

There was a Greek geographer in the first century A.D. who described Jerusalem as a “place that would not be envied, one for which no one would fight.”¹⁰ The carnal mind might say this of Mrs. Eddy’s definition of heaven, for her definition requires that we be willing to let go of a material sense of good, and find all we need in God, good. As Mrs. Eddy bluntly puts it, “...the good man’s heaven would be a hell to the sinner.”¹¹

So, when we seek to present ourselves to the Lord, it’s useful to ask ourselves: do we really want heaven as Mrs. Eddy defines it? This is merely another way of phrasing the question: are we practicing Christian Science in order to make ourselves happy and comfortable in matter, or are we practicing it to overcome matter altogether and find ourselves forever in the presence of the Lord?

Perhaps it’s this seeming pull of matter and materialism that would claim to cause us to want to resist, on any level, the truth of divine Love’s destruction of all sin, disease and death! There’s a great poem by Stephen Crane of *The Red Badge of Courage* fame.

The poem, titled, “The Wayfarer” goes,

“The wayfarer,
Perceiving the pathway to truth,
Was struck with astonishment.
It was thickly grown with weeds.
‘Ha,’ he said,
‘I see that no one has passed here
In a long time.’
Later he saw that each weed was a singular knife.
‘Well,’ he mumbled at last,
‘Doubtless there are other roads.’”

Mrs. Eddy writes, “Few understand or adhere to Jesus’ divine precepts for living and healing. Why? Because his precepts require the disciple to cut off the right hand and pluck out the right eye,—that is, to set aside even the most cherished beliefs and practices, to leave all for Christ.”¹² This necessity doesn’t stop with merely giving up the grosser temptations of mortal mind—the drugs, the alcohol, the medicine, the sensualism, the gossip, etc. Those are just the beginning. However difficult those may have seemed

to give up, the real need is to give up a false sense of self and others in order to gain the spiritual sense of God and man—a sense demonstrated not so much by our words as by our thoughts and deeds.

But what blessings pour forth when we subdue the carnal mind with its petty resentments, envyings, competitions, and bloated sense of self-importance, and see in its place the man of God's creating, whole, upright, free and joyful! This truly is a renewal—when that which always has been becomes to us new again; when we, in Paul's words, put off the old man and put on the new; when we long for the things of Spirit so completely that we shed every false belief and reliance in order to obtain it. And obtain it we do!

As we all know from experience, the carnal mind's resistance to Truth and insistence upon its own ways and means isn't the only obstacle that tries to set itself up in our path. The legitimate cares of human life can also claim to get in the way.

History records that Abraham Lincoln liked to tell of a rather pious Civil War officer who was distressed by his men's continual use of profanity. One day he accosted one of the more profane teamsters. "My friend," he said, "Do you know you are in a very dangerous business? You may be killed. Don't you think you should be giving some consideration to your soul's salvation?" "Well, Colonel, I do think about it," the driver replied. I know that I ought to get religion." "Well, why don't you?" "Colonel," answered the teamster, "If I get religion, who in blankety-blank is going to drive these mules?"

To mortal sense, our human obligations—and even, often, our so-called human pleasures—are dealt with outside of and apart from our metaphysical work, as if the two were somehow separate. But Christian Science separated from whatever mules we're responsible for driving is abstract and impractical. Rather, Christian Science informs and governs our every thought, our every action, our every word.

I've always admired Christian Science nurses for their skills in this direction. Certainly, a portion of the nursing job includes performing tasks that others might find boring, mundane, even distasteful. And yet, I've never seen a nurse doing these tasks in anything other than a cheerful, loving way. It's a living, breathing example of Paul's instruction to the Colossians, "whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to

the Lord."¹³ And since God is everywhere, it seems legitimate to add, "in His presence."

Doing our appointed task in the presence of the Lord means doing it as His reflection. It means finding the qualities included in the task and expressing them not only to the best of our current abilities, but striving to ever improve those abilities. Christian Science nurses approach every patient metaphysically, seeing both themselves and the patient as forever a reflection in the presence of the Lord. And, they see the task at hand—whether it be dressing a wound, feeding, bathing, lifting or reading—as an opportunity, not to aid a suffering mortal, but to express cleanliness, the uplifting power of the Christ, the peace and power of the Word, or whatever other of the infinite qualities of God come to thought at the moment!

The mule driver believed there were duties that could only be performed by sacrificing holy thought; that there were material tasks that could be accomplished only through material thought and action, rather than through spiritual activity. Our nurses prove that claim to be false every day. As do our nursing facilities. They stand firm in the face of the world's claim that so-called physical problems need physical treatment. They provide daily, living proof that Divine Love, the power of Spirit, really does meet every human need, really does set tables in the wilderness, really does heal every problem that presents itself to human consciousness.

Every time we turn on the news and find ourselves having to hit the mute button for the endless stream of pharmaceutical ads, we're reminded of mortal mind's resistance to the healing presence that Arden Wood represents. Arden Wood is a rock standing firm against the crashing waves of the world's insistence on the necessity for material ways and means.

It provides a refuge where thought rejoices in the power of Love, Spirit, Truth to heal and save. It's a shining example of Paul's instruction to "Pray without ceasing."¹⁴

Let's consider this instruction for a moment. How can we pray without ever stopping? Animal magnetism says this gets repetitive, even boring, and insists that we need something more to stimulate our mind and keep us engaged. But the Psalmist sings, "O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day"¹⁵

and “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.”¹⁶

Here we are, back in the house of the Lord, in His temple. The Psalmist’s desire is never to leave. And we never need leave. God and His fullness truly is sufficient for us. We can indeed pray without ceasing, without needing a break or a vacation, by seeking to bring every thought—every last one—into conformity with “that Mind which was also in Christ Jesus.”¹⁷ We’re always thinking something—we might as well be striving to ensure that that “something” is always in line with Truth. The only obstacle to this is the carnal mind’s resistance to Truth. Our task is to overcome this animal magnetic suggestion—overcome it with the truth that we love to pray, that we love to be God’s man, to think His thoughts. We love it so much that prayer imbues our every thought, every action, every word. And if you need a walking, talking example of just what this means, look at our Christian Science nurses!

Our own efforts in this direction are so beautifully supported at a place like Arden Wood. The distractions are kept to a minimum. We can find care when we need care, Truth declared when we need it declared; but we can also find silence when we need silence, and we can rejoice in the opportunity to control our thinking with the support of those around us. It is important to remember that we can control our thinking even when those around us are not! In the presence of the Lord, we have all the support we need.

There’s an interesting line in the Interpreter’s Bible commentary on the passage from the 95th Psalm, “Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving.” “The verb here,” states the *Interpreter’s Bible*, “implies that the throng is in motion.”¹⁸

We come into the presence of the Lord as we are mentally in motion, pushing forward, leaving behind old reliances, and outgrown beliefs, and claiming with every thought and action the power, dominion, and freedom of Soul, Spirit. Do we feel like we’ve read the same old lines from *Science and Health* so often that they don’t mean anything anymore? Then we’re reading them with mortal mind, rather than immortal Mind. Each truth in

our Leader’s writings is forever fresh and healing, bringing renewal to thought and body when viewed in its true light. Each of us knows well the glorious light that bursts upon thought when we suddenly see deeper meaning in what had previously seemed oh-so-familiar words. And, in fact, there’s enough deeper meaning in each line of our Leader’s writings to give us those bursts each time we open the books—if we’re willing to handle mortal mind’s suggestion that “I already *know* that” or “there’s nothing more there to be mined.” We find those bursts when we stay mentally in motion, forever pushing outward in our understanding and practice of those seemingly familiar truths.

Staying mentally in motion, being willing to persist in prayer despite the alarming testimony of the physical senses, demanding of ourselves that we see new insights, does bring healing. In *We Knew Mary Baker Eddy*, Emma Easton Newman recounts that in the March Primary class of 1889, Mrs. Eddy “asked one woman what she would do if she were treating a case that did not yield. The answer was, ‘I would examine my own thought.’ Mrs. Eddy then asked her what she would do if the case still did not yield. The woman answered she would handle animal magnetism. Again Mrs. Eddy repeated her question, and the woman said, ‘I suppose I’d give it up.’ ‘And that,’ Mrs. Eddy said, ‘is just what you should not do.’ ”¹⁹

A woman, a Christian Scientist, discovered a growth under the skin of one hand. She worked to deepen her understanding of Christian Science, but instead of disappearing, the growth seemed to get bigger. She prayed to know that the only growth there can be is growth in grace and understanding. The problem seemed to get bigger. She prayed to know that she could not be deceived by the illusion of the material senses—that she could and did know herself only as formed by the love of Principle, and therefore as whole, perfect, free. The problem seemed to get bigger. She had been experiencing some conflict with a co-worker, so she prayed to handle personal sense and resentment, and to see her co-worker as the competent, able, useful, and loved idea of Love. She had a beautiful healing of that relationship, but the growth got bigger. She prayed to know that the only law that could govern her was the law of God—that there was no

such thing as a material law that could determine her state of health. But the problem remained aggressive.

To make a long story short, she threw everything she could think of metaphysically at the problem for over a year, but nothing seemed to help. The growth had gotten so large that it interfered with her use of one finger, and she began to feel fearful.

One day, she was reading a Christian Science lecture, which included the story of a healing of a growth on a hand. The prayerful work and the truths that had become apparent did not register with our friend—she fixated completely on the fact that this individual had been healed, while she had not.

As she sat, sadly pondering this fact, she suddenly laughed out loud. It struck her that if one individual is healed, *all* individuals are healed, because, as our Leader assures us, “Love is impartial and universal in its adaptation and bestowals.”²⁰ The word “universal,” in particular, caught her attention. She suddenly grasped in a whole new way that Love really is *universal*, meaning everywhere. She realized that she could not possibly be out of God’s presence, nor could she possibly be deceived into thinking she could be anywhere *but* in the presence of her loving Father-Mother. The consciousness of His presence was suddenly so clear and present to her that the room seemed wholly filled with light—she couldn’t see rugs or furniture, only light. When she looked at her hand, the growth was completely gone. And it never returned.

God IS ever-present, and we are forever in the presence of the Lord. The Psalmist sings, “If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou are there.”²¹ Note just who it was that made the bed there! One theological definition of “hell” is “separation from God.” The Psalmist is assuring us that, even if we find ourselves in a place where we think God is not (either physically or mentally), He’s still there. We are still in His presence. There is no circumstance under which the blinders cannot fall from our eyes, and we cannot behold ourselves where we really are. As our Leader writes, “This spiritual consciousness is therefore a present possibility.”²²

There are many citations in Mrs. Eddy’s writings that bring out this year’s theme of renewal and healing; I’d like to conclude with this quote from her sermon, *The People’s Idea of God*. She states, “O Christian Scientist, thou of the church of the new-born; awake to a higher and holier love for God and man; put on the whole armor of Truth; rejoice in hope; be patient in tribulation; — that ye may go to the bed of anguish, and look upon this dream of life in matter, girt with a higher sense of omnipotence; and behold once again the power of divine Life and Love to heal and reinstate man in God’s own image and likeness, having ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism.’ ”²³

Thank you to Arden Wood, its nurses, administrators, and staff for providing a place for this awakening, and for the beautiful demonstrations you make of that awakening every day. Let’s daily renew our commitment to this great work—and rejoice in the blessings that cannot fail to come from it!

NOTES:

- 1 Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, pp. 588-589
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 588-589
- 3 Elizabeth Trevithick, C.S., "They Need Not Depart," Arden Wood talk of March 2010
- 4 Colossians 3:3
- 5 See I Samuel 1:24-28
- 6 Mary Baker Eddy, *Retrospection and Introspection*, p. 21
- 7 *Science and Health*, p. 595
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 589
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 587
- 10 See *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, © 1985 Harper and Row, p. 463
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 35
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 141
- 13 Colossians 3:23
- 14 I Thessalonians 5:17
- 15 Psalms 119:97
- 16 Psalms 27:4
- 17 Philippians 2:5
- 18 *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 4, © 1955 Abingdon Press, p. 514
- 19 The Christian Science Publishing Society, *We Knew Mary Baker Eddy* (1979 edition), p. 94
- 20 *Science and Health*, p. 13
- 21 Psalms 139:8
- 22 *Science and Health*, p. 574
- 23 Mary Baker Eddy, *The People's Idea of God*, p. 14



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