July 2006 Text/Speech/Sermon In Songs

Swedish Church, Boston, Massachusetts

Hush! Hush! Somebody Callin’ Mah Name

Glory, Glory! Hallelujah! Since I Laid Mah Burdon Down

Will The Circle Be Broken Bye And Bye, Lord Bye ‘n’ Bye?

All Religion is of life and the life of religion is to do good.

Emanuel Swedenborg

Truth Is Love In Action

Truth is the way love works. Most of us sense that. Actions we perform out of love are honest actions, genuine expressions in a physical form of what love means, or the truth of love. Swedenborgians feel that ultimately the two are inseparable, a part of the same reality. Actualized love is truth, and hence faith and charity are especially significant in human living. Swedenborg defines faith as a kind of inner sight, a perception of what is true. Charity is founded in the desire to do service and live a useful life, beginning with the choice of career or life work. The spiritual life involves the active development of a useful and meaningful life in service to the betterment of the world as a whole. Whereas the religious life often connotes withdrawal from the world and life, active participation in the world is a commitment to actualizing faith and charity. The life of charity and faith parallel the union of love and truth which is the essence of God.
And perhaps the most popular of Swedenborg's spiritual growth practices is his Zen-like discussions on "being useful." Teilhard de Chardin once said, "Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous (although we have this ambition) as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value." For Swedenborg, such a focus provides the ground for future spiritual growth. As Paul Zacharias, a Swedenborgian minister, observes in his pamphlet This We Believe, "Everyone who lives up to the best he knows, whether Christian, Jew, Moslem, or Pagan, is truly a member of the church Invisible."

Greetings, Officers, Members, Friends, Colleagues, Visitors and All Others, so that no one feels left out.

As you know, my name is François Clemmons. I added the S. for Scarborough when I got my honorary doctorate from Middlebury College in 1996. I recently turned 61 in April and ever since I've been doing a lot of self-evaluation. I've been asking myself questions about who I am and what I am and why. It's been a painfully laborious process and I certainly won't bore you with all the minutiae I’ve come up with. But on the whole I’ve discovered a number of things I want to share with you this morning.

I was born in Birmingham, Alabama to humble, uneducated, plain folks. My parents were young and struggled mightily and not always successfully, to try and understand the challenge they had been presented with. My mother worked as a domestic servant and my father worked in a saw mill.

Through a series of events including a Katrina-like hurricane my family wound up in urban, industrialized, mid-western, Youngstown, Ohio. At 18, I left Youngstown, went to Oberlin College, and then Carnegie-Mellon for my MFA, had a disastrous marriage, and eventually, proceeded to establish myself as a serious free-lance singer in Manhattan. After 30 something years, with more than modest success, life experiences and a series of financial set-backs helped me to make the momentous decision to move to Middlebury, Vermont and begin my teaching career.
Taking into account many circumstances, I sincerely feel that since about 1999, I have been blessed to live in a beautiful part of the country, the long winters or muddy spring season, notwithstanding. Middlebury, Vermont is an idyllic little town nestled in the middle of a very small New England state. This small village has almost no violent crime to speak of, lots of open vistas, quaint little farms, and country inns, excellent restaurants, skiing and hockey in the winter for those who LOVE the cold; the glorious colors of the fall season, and everyone agrees that the schools are getting better all the time. Indeed this is a place about which you’d say, ‘This is a perfect place to raise our children.

As a part of the Middlebury College community there’re lots of academic and social stimulation close at hand. There are more lectures than one can ever attend even if that’s all you did, but I do have to teach and perform. Although, I know more than ever now that my performing is also teaching. I swim in the Olympic-sized Natatorium almost every day except weekends. One can go for many long walks, sit quietly in local cafes sipping tea or coffee while reading or working on one’s computer. One can spend time talking quietly with old friends or indeed, making new friends. In addition to all of that on almost any night I can drive up to Burlington for more theater, restaurants, friends, and movies.

However, there is one problem that everybody knows about, and that has to do with diversity, but we won’t go into that now. There’re lots of white people and not many other nationalities represented in Vermont. The state has 99% white people in addition to having one of the smallest overall populations of all of the states.

Now that you have a bit of background, I’d like to say that one of the most important conclusions I’ve come to is that I think that I’m a beautiful person, now before you start laughing, I mean a spiritually beautiful person, although I don’t think I did so badly physically either. Nevertheless, I mean this spiritually. Not everyone wants to be a spiritual person or much less a beautiful spiritual person. Even though I believe that everyone has a spiritual essence or soul, we don’t all choose to acknowledge it or develop it. I think it is a personal matter and will not concern myself at this time with the possible results of not acknowledging our inherent spiritual nature.
In my case, this has required much discipline along with many lonely hours of thinking for this inveterate, committed extrovert. When I got into this project I soon realized that I’d have to let a lot of my extrovert ways go: like going out on the town often and hanging out in bars and doing a lot of pointless, social drinking. I realized that there’d have to be lots of changes because now I had a new goal: I wanted to know more about just who I am and what has my life been up to til now. Please, don’t misunderstand, I am still asking questions. I probably will for the rest of my life. But, I’m reconciled to that. And that’s my process now.

Please understand this, I am not a recluse now and probably never will be. I still very much love and enjoy people. My cosmic children from the college community and those who have graduated come to visit almost every day and/or every week it seems. I am rarely physically alone. But I realize that to have a certain satisfaction in my life I need some quality time alone. Boy, that’s new for me. For the first 55 years of my life I hated being alone. I was very successful at avoiding it. Now, I need it.

Things, sometimes very beautiful things happen in that time alone. For example, I’m now writing my autobiography—-hopefully it’ll soon be finished and I’ll be looking for a publisher, I’ve written some poetry, I’ve prepared another book on meditation for an extrovert, I’ve written 5 children’s stories and am now looking for publishers. As if that were not enough I’ve lost approximately 110 pounds over the last 18 months. That’s what spending some time alone can do.

Spending time alone, makes all of us ask ‘Just what have we been doing all these years and has it amounted to much of anything?’ And if it has amounted to anything: ‘Just what is that?’ And, indeed, if it hasn’t, ‘Why hasn’t it amounted to much?’ Well as you can imagine, I had a lot of questions and I’ve also come up with a few answers.

Before I go any further, I’d like to sing a few songs for you. When I finish singing we can go on with this analogy and I’m sure you’ll have a few answers too as well as a few questions.

(Maybe, Roland Hayes, one of my heroes who spent the last years in his life in Boston)
Prepare Me One Body     arr. Roland Hayes

Sustah Mary Had-a-but One Chile     “

Li’l Boy, How Old Are You?     arr. Roland Hayes

Now to continue my analysis. During my meditation and questioning I realized that in addition to working on my spirituality, I love my friends. I have several right here in this church today. Through my art and travels I have developed and maintained deep friendships all over the world that have lasted for many years. I have an active correspondence with these friends and speak to them as well as email them sometimes every day: isn’t that right Chuck?

Friendship has gotten me through this almost, now notice I say, ‘almost’ celibate life. Personally, I hate celibacy, but as I look back, I realize that I have been alone for 3 and 4 years at a time all during my adult life. During this time, I’ve never lived with anyone and have been relatively free to travel whenever and however I’ve needed to. But I’ve paid a heavy price for that freedom, particularly in the many lonely hours I’ve spent in great hotel rooms all over the globe, in airports, on trains, buses, limousines, yes, even great concert halls, too.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t talk for just a moment about my almost 30 years as Officer Clemmons on Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood. I met Fred Rogers in 1968 at Third Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh where I was church soloist trying to earn some money as I completed my MFA from Carnegie-Mellon University.

Fred was a quiet, loving, committed balm of fresh air in my life. If you want to know more about him you should read my autobiography where I speak briefly about his influence in my life and the early development of the show and my life.

In my opinion, he was a genius. He convinced me that he loved me, and there began one of the most important, meaningful experiences I’ve ever had. He brought me onto the show and helped me to believe in myself and give the very best I had to offer.
whatever that happened to be. Fred was perhaps the most patient man I’ve ever known. He wasn’t perfect and he knew it, but the hours I spent filming with him and interacting with the other Neighbors were some of the finest hours of my entire life. He sponsored my first audition tour of Europe and served as my surrogate father and prime mentor where I had never really had one. I could say more but now you know about the autobiography and some of the issues I deal with in more details. But for now, I need to move on with this brief history.

Regrettably, sometimes, I’ve lamented that traveling and singing so much has been very tough on developing close intimate relationships for me.

Through the assistance and support of my closest friends I have realized some of my most cherished dreams: to sing and travel to see the world. In the early 80’s I started the world renowned singing group, The Harlem Spiritual Ensemble which sang all over the world and made a couple of nice recordings. I recognized that I’m tough and can persevere and strive on in some of the most disheartening times. Having an international career and leading a group of temperamental, unpredictable, and often capricious singers can truly test you. Nothing is ever guaranteed and I developed my spontaneity as well as my reserve. I realized that I couldn’t do everything that came to my mind on the spot: like killing a singer who was caught with drugs, or how to deal with two singers who had been having an affair and were now mad at each other and didn’t want to sing together anymore, or worse yet, when people wanted to break their contracts and leave the group to go on vacation with their husbands or wives.

It’ll test your spiritually, if you have any, your patience, your creativity, your commitment, your managerial skills, and your physical stamina...just to name a few. There were many nights when I asked myself ‘Why in the world was I doing this?’ and ‘If I should continue.’

The reason I came to was two fold. I have a commission to serve humanity and I love to sing. Those twin–factors animated/supplied the fuel for my dream for over ten years. I’ve always recognized that my singing was something I was fashioned to do to serve the immediate community and indeed, the world.
From my earliest years in Youngstown when the ladies shouted in church and threw their purses across the pews on Sunday mornings to the rhythmic, steady applause of an enraptured full house in Berlin, Germany or the frenzied, intense approval of an all-Italian audience that wouldn’t go home after 7 encores. Through it all I saw myself as serving the needs of all of humanity.

This matter of service also included healing or contributing something intangible that made the challenging lives of countless thousands of friends, and admirers, better. As a vessel for this spirituality which I recognized in my youth, I realized that an abundant portion of divine-well-being issued forth as long as I stayed open and receptive to this possibility. I was blessed to share in this special experience with many, many people all over the world. I don’t pretend to fully understand it, but the sound of my voice and the indescribable, dynamic message that I allow myself to witness, continues even to this day.

I feel a profound sense of helplessness, helpfulness, and humility when I recognize that on some cosmic level, conscious and subconsciously, I have consented to be a channel, or shared touchstone for this kind of unique change in people’s lives. I am grateful when people come forward and share this revelation with me. For my part, I remain quiet…listening, and realize that being allowed to give….being allowed to serve in this manner is part of my ‘commission’ or ‘anointment’. I thank God it came with the original package.

Steal Away                        arr. Hall Johnson
Joshua Fit Duh Battle of Jericho   Traditional
Balm In Gilead                     Traditional

I’ve done some limited reading about Mr. Emanuel Swedenborg, the revered founder of your faith, with the help of my friend Herb Ziegler who initially came up with the idea of me visiting your church today. I was deeply moved by his philosophy of
service to the community: one’s good works. I put him in the
category of other great spiritual leaders like: Mary Baker Eddy who
started Christian Science or Ernest Holmes, the founder of Religious
Science and indeed, John and Mary Fillmore who together founded
Unity Church. All of these great spiritual souls blessed and
improved the lives of countless thousands, indeed maybe, millions
of searching individuals who turned to them for help and guidance.

I, too, am one of those grateful souls who have been blessed
by the knowledge and inspiration of this great man. Thank you
Herb for opening the door for me.

In conclusion, I’d like to say what a joy it has been to be with
you this blessed day, etc.......I’d like to leave you with one song:

Ah Just Come From The Fountain Traditional