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Fall 1986

## Diaconalogue, No. 10

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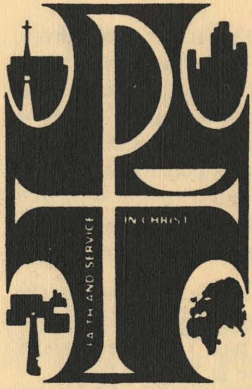
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# Diaconalogue

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE LUTHERAN DEACONESS ASSOCIATION, INC., TO ENHANCE THE DIALOGUE AND EXCHANGE AMONG PEOPLE WITH DIACONAL HEARTS

Number 10 Fall, 1986

## Foundations

### RUTHFUL PEOPLE

I was recently called upon to lead a Bible study on the book of Ruth. As I was preparing, I discovered a new word — ruthful. Webster's dictionary defines it as "full of ruth," and "ruth" is defined as compassion for the misery of another.

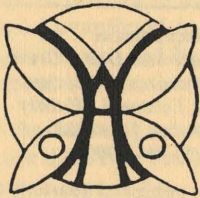
When God uses us as instruments of redemption, service and compassion, we, like our sister, Ruth, are ruthful people.

Being a servant, being compassionate, being ruthful is the way we live our daily **diakonia**. In this issue of **Diaconalogue**, two of our current readers, Milli

Bishton and Susan Wacker-Roepke, have shared their own ministries and the mutual ministries of others around them. It is exciting to have a bit of "dialogue" between readers in this way as our title suggests — diaconal dialogue. These ruthful readers can be a support to each of us. We would also enjoy hearing from you.

Blessing in your ruthfulness.

*Diane Greve, editor*



Women Who Care

### "HOPE ALIVE"

Sharing Hope with the Hopeless *by Milli Bishton*

The phone was ringing in my basement office — long before business hours were scheduled to begin. I was still sipping my morning coffee at the breakfast table. I rose quickly, descended the twelve stairs in six giant steps, and answered on the third ring. A woman's voice at the other end of the line, flat and noticeably emotionless, asked, "Can you tell me what Hope Alive is and what you do? My counselor suggested that I call you."

I sat down in my desk chair and took a long, quiet breath. "You want to know whether we're the kind of group that you could feel comfortable with and that would offer you some hope in the midst of what you're going through right now?"

"That's right," she answered. "I'm glad you've called us," I went on, "because that's exactly the purpose for our existence. Hope Alive was organized twelve years ago because women like you — and I was one of them — found that when we were able to talk out our problems, fears, and negative feelings with a few understanding friends, we began to feel hope again.

"We discovered that other women knew the pain and loneliness we were feeling. These women too had experienced the low self-esteem, the sense of emptiness and powerlessness that lead to depression and, yes, even to thoughts of suicide. WE WERE NOT ALONE.

"And WE FOUND WE COULD CHANGE! It took encouragement and love from understanding friends. But we did learn to make appropriate changes in the way we thought and acted. When we changed, our situations changed. The main idea behind Hope Alive support groups is that we all need an environment of acceptance, understanding, trust, and respect in order to make it through the problems and challenges of life!"

My voice was low but earnest as I finished, took a breath, and then paused for a response from the other end of the wire.

"That sounds like what I need right now." The woman's voice had just a shade more emotion. "I feel so empty and alone. I have  
*(continued on p. 2)*

*(continued from front page)*

a good husband and a nice home, but my life just doesn't feel worth living. I can't bring myself to clean my house, yet I hate myself for letting it get to such a mess! I don't feel able to care about anyone or anything..." Her voice broke.

For the next 15 minutes, while my coffee chilled to room temperature, I chatted with the woman, reflecting back her feelings with understanding, reassuring her that she would indeed "belong" at a Hope Alive meeting, and obtaining her commitment to attend.

In the course of the conversation the woman shared that she was a Christian and that she attended a weekly Bible study. "I wouldn't dare to reveal any of these feelings to my Bible study friends. They would interpret them as lack of faith," she explained sadly, "so each week I try to put on a happy face."

Yet she described coming home from the study sessions each week with a heavier feeling of depression. God seemed farther and farther away. This reinforced her fear that she had lost her faith and was damned — causing her to be overwhelmed by total hopelessness about her situation.

Carol did come to the next Hope Alive Support Group meeting. She learned not to be so hard on herself, to choose one task at a time to accomplish in her home and to affirm herself, rather than to belittle what she had done.

Carol learned that the voice which condemned her was not God's but one that originated in her own unhappy past — a voice she could change to one that spoke more kindly, "Come unto me all you that...are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

She is on her way to a new, more open way of relating with God and the people who care about her so that she no longer feels isolated and unworthy. Carol is also allowing herself to explore her own interests and talents and is finding her energy renewed.

Talking to women who feel overwhelmed by hopelessness or grief has been a 12 year ministry for me. I am also a homemaker, mother of 4 grown children and a grandmother.

I live in Fort Wayne, Indiana, with my husband Harry and my 95 year old mother-in-law, Emily.

A 1948 graduate of Valparaiso University with a degree in sociology, I earned a masters degree in counseling at St. Francis College in Fort Wayne in 1984. Before my involvement in Hope Alive, I served on three Lutheran Women's Missionary League committees in Indiana — Christian Growth, Mission Service, and Leadership Training. I consider these LWML responsibilities a major influence in my personal Christian

development, but I also remember a time — while carrying out these responsibilities — when I felt frightened and depressed about what was happening in my family. And the idea of even mentioning this to my friends in LWML was unthinkable.

It took a wise counselor to help me face my feelings and discover that God wanted more of me than to be a "perfect mother." God wanted me to learn the deeper meaning of God's own unconditional love for me. I learned to know God as the one who redeems failures and restores joy to the despairing.

I co-founded Hope Alive, Inc. with a friend, in 1974 — beginning with workshops on self-esteem, grief, and depression. Since then I have served as vice-president and then president of the Board. For the last two and a half years I have been executive director. Each year I have had the opportunity to touch the lives of hundreds of women with a message of love, faith and hope.

We share basic truths from God's word, translated into the particular meaning they hold for people who have been emotionally injured — by experiencing a death, abuse (verbal as well as physical), rejection, divorce, disability, failure, or depressive illness.

We have expressed these truths in our "Statements of Hope" which are given to each person at their first support group meeting.

The first is, "I am a person of worth and significance. I accept the person I am at this moment no matter what my negative feelings or past experiences."

The second is, "I have a body, a mind, and a spirit which require regular care and nourishment. I commit myself to caring for these needs so that I may lead a satisfying life and maintain the physical, mental and spiritual resources to care for others."

These and other statements of hope are reaffirmed by the women in the group as they talk about their feelings and focus on how these relate to their thoughts, their beliefs, their "self talk" and their actions. For example; many people — many Christian people — have learned to belittle themselves and reject sincere compliments because they feel "unworthy."

They may have learned to "take the blame" for everything; or they may feel driven to attempt to make everyone approve of them. This sets them up for great stress in their daily life and unendurable stress and pain when grief and tragedy strike. Their faith may fail to comfort them because old habits of thinking actually have taken priority over the precious truth of God's love and forgiveness.

Sometimes people ask me how I handle the stress of spending so much time with women who have deep problems. My answer is that

I always remember that it is not my doing but God's doing — that when I have done what God has guided me to do, I can let God carry the rest of the load. I don't try to be the "perfect" anything. Rather I make it my goal to fully be a "real" person — one who can love, hurt, fail, and triumph — so that I can witness faithfully to the reality of God's comforting grace and abiding presence.

"Be ready always to give an answer of the Hope that is within you," is the message for each of us. That is how I see the ministry God has given to me in Hope Alive.

What a merciful God we have — who comforts and strengthens us in our hardships and trials. And why does God do this? So that when others are troubled, needing our sympathy and encouragement, we can pass on to them this same help and comfort God has given us.

I can only thank and praise God for giving me the great privilege of "sharing Hope with the hopeless" through Hope Alive, Inc.

*Milli Bishton is the executive director of Hope Alive, Inc. in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She was one of the first people to become a regular reader of Diaconalogue.*

*For more information on Hope Alive, Inc., you can write to:*

*Milli Bishton  
4912 Forest Grove Dr.  
Fort Wayne, Indiana 46835*

#### **Diaconalogue**

*Editor: Deaconess Diane Greve  
Lutheran Deaconess Association  
Center for Diaconal Ministry  
Valparaiso, IN 46383  
(219) 464-0909*

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Articles from **Diaconalogue** may be reprinted with acknowledgement. Organizations doing so are required to send a copy of that publication to the Lutheran Deaconess Association.

From its beginning in 1919, the Lutheran Deaconess Association has been dedicated to a three-fold task: recruiting and educating women for the diaconate, supporting deaconesses in their ministries, and serving the church in its diaconal mission.

This newsletter is designed to affirm and encourage laity who do "diakonia" so that we can learn from, encourage, and support each other in our Christian service. In this way, we hope to serve the church in a new way.

**We are always seeking resources for our publication. If you know of an individual whose life is an example of diaconal service or if you are interested in writing such an article, please write or call Diane Greve, Editor.**

# PICKING UP GARBAGE

by Susan Wacker-Roepke

“Well, I hate it!”

Those were the words spoken by John in regards to his “servant” job. He and I were sitting together eating lunch in the little greasy spoon on the corner of Lawrence and Sheridan, in the heart of Chicago Uptown, when I began to see the glimmer of what was pure gold.

John hung around the Ministry a lot. He preferred it to the group home where he lived. He was paid very minimal wages for his work at Chicago Uptown Ministry, which consisted of taking out the garbage and picking up litter in the yard.

He was the kind of person it’s sometimes hard to love. Mentally handicapped, abandoned by his parents at the age of twelve, John overflowed with bitterness and anger.

For the two weeks that our business manager was on vacation, it became my responsibility to see that John came to work on time, neatly dressed, bathed, hair clean, and to make sure his duties were done. As John had never been real partial to me, this, in my book, was real servanthood for me!

“I have my pride, Susan! To think of it — doing the same jobs every day!”

His feelings triggered something in me. My thoughts flashed back to Christ’s example of servanthood.

We talked then of doing the jobs no one else wanted to do — emptying ourselves of pride, like Jesus, who emptied himself through his suffering, his serving, the nastiness of washing dirty feet. John could relate.

“The garbage! Nothing is more disgusting! I feel like a slave, Susan!”

My eyes were opened. Sitting in front of me was my teacher! I hadn’t really been open to John before then — at least not open to learning anything from him. He was the weak one, the powerless one, the one needing to be ministered to. I remembered learning once that servanthood is never one-way...not done to another person, but is with and for others, putting ourselves in a position to be served by “the least of these.”

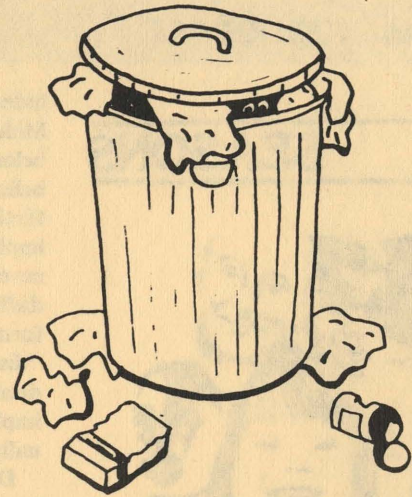
I was the one being served! It was not John who’d been entrusted to my care these two weeks nearly as much as it was I who’d been entrusted to his!

Picking up the garbage was John’s “footwashing service.” What is mine?

Uptown is Chicago’s “dumping grounds.” It’s human dumping grounds — filled with society’s throw-aways. Looking around the lunch room, I saw the poor, the lonely, the despised, the outcast, the miserable, the misfit who had all been dumped there. The high-rises, group homes, nursing homes, the bars, and the streets are filled with these people. They are Appalachian white, Native American, oriental, black, hispanic. They are sick; crippled, retarded, emotionally disabled, alcoholic. They are unskilled, ill-educated, and illegal aliens.

Some of them came to the Ministry. They came for food, clothes, a cup of coffee, a blanket or mattress. They came to learn...to learn how to read, how to discipline their children, how to cook, or just how to tie their kid’s shoes. They came to talk to someone who would care. They came to worship.

I am called to identify with these people...to see that nothing in them is strange to me...to enter into that community of poverty.



And, like John, I hate it! I hate it for the same reason John hates it. I can’t be a servant unless I am emptied first.

I really preferred the title “social worker” to that of “servant” some days. I really liked helping poor people as long as that meant stooping down from my position of strength and superiority to do it. But that wasn’t servanthood.

Serving is to empty myself of any advantage in **being with** others. I must be emptied of my self-sufficiency, and personal strength which prevents me from wholly entering into another’s world. Admitting my essential nothingness and limitations is admitting my creatureliness. That’s the hard part! I hate feeling impoverished! I hate being weak!

“If you hate your work so much, John, what is it that helps you to keep doing it?” I asked. I wanted to see if there was still more I could learn from John.

“I have no idea, Susan!” was John’s response.

But I do have an idea. John would not miss Sunday worship at the Ministry because the Lord’s Supper was celebrated each week. There, he allowed his emptiness to be filled with God’s grace. John knew where his strength came from.

In the Eucharist, I, too, am reminded of my oneness with those around me. Together we are in need of being filled by God’s grace. That, too, is where I am nurtured, nourished on the body and blood of Christ. That, too, is where I am strengthened and forgiven.

My lunch with John concluded my two weeks of working with him as his “supervisor.” But I have remembered his example of servanthood. And seeing my own poverty gave me new eyes.

“With us, therefore, worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimation of anyone; even if they once counted in our understanding of Christ, they do so no longer.”

I Corinthians 5:16.

Picking up the garbage was John’s “footwashing ministry.” What is yours? What do you hate about it? Where do you get your strength to continue in that ministry?

*Deaconess Susan Wacker-Roepke, Staunton, Virginia, served at Chicago Uptown Ministry from 1979 to 1982. The above article is edited from a presentation she gave at the Lutheran Deaconess Conference in 1980.*

## SEASONS



The Disabled and Their Families:  
Caring and Coping

the inter-faith family journal

This quarterly publication is available through the Inter-Faith Committee on the Family in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Families face a variety of struggles — death, economic hardships, disabilities. *Seasons* takes an honest, educated, God-centered look at these and other varied concerns. The past two issues have focused on disabilities. Reprinted below are some excerpts from those two issues: “The Disabled and Their Families: Disability and Grace” and “The Disabled and Their Families: Caring and Coping.”

Bishop Montgomery has proclaimed this Sunday “Disability Awareness Sunday” in the Diocese of Chicago. For this, I have been asked to speak to you. Guess why? Because I don’t charge for pulpit supply! And besides being inexpensive, I also have a disability. Notice the terminology, the noun here is “disability.” “Handicaps” are for horses and bowling balls. Forget “cripple”: this

hideous term should have been left in the Middle Ages or kindergarten where it belongs, and “affliction” is worse: I don’t believe in a God who runs around “afflicting” people with the relish that this verb implies. That God is not our God. That God never would have thought of puppy dogs and daffodils. Likewise, disability in adjective form should never be used. I am not a “disabled person,” for my personhood is not disabled. (I tend to get violent when this is implied.) But, I do have a disability — actually, I have many, as does each of you.

Disabilities are, indeed, the richest of blessings in life, and God, in joyous, merciful concern, did not reserve them for gimps but gave them also to walkies; so, that they, too, might know joy. The only difference is that God sometimes wraps them in different packages: grief, for instance, sorrow, too, frustration, anxiety, pain, loneliness, and, of course, death. Disabilities make up the wildernesses of my life and yours — one of my wildernesses is more obvious than most. Disabilities are the wildernesses and deserts where we sometimes willingly go and sometimes are driven. Deserts are the darkneses that always last forty years longer than we think we can endure, but they are the cutting edge of life, they are where God meets us to reconvert and woo us over and over and over again.

Excerpted from “Mud Puddles”  
by Barbara Carlton. *Seasons* Vol-  
umn 5, Number 2, April, 1986

There are topics which we can understand only at first hand. Grief, for instance. How many of us have felt the urge to scream at those stupid people who try to assure us, in our times of tragedy, that “they know how we feel.”

Another such topic is treated in this issue of *Seasons*: the discovery that you or a member of your family has a severely disabling condition. You don’t know what

it’s like till it happens to you. You have to look at, maybe even wash and clothe, a body which does not conform to cultural stereotypes of the “beautiful” or the “natural.” You have to experience the death of certain dreams and fantasies. It takes some doing, for instance, for the father of newborn baby girl to cast his mind twenty years into the future, and imagine his princess dressed in a white wedding gown and promenading down the aisle — in a wheelchair. You don’t make such mental adjustments until necessity forces itself upon you.

But I do not mean to suggest that it is simply impossible for the “uninitiated” to learn something from the experience of persons who suffer from severe disabilities. I only mean that those of us without (obvious!) disabilities cannot begin to understand the sufferings and the courage of families who have a severely disabled member unless we listen attentively to the stories of their actual experience. What’s more, we, the well-bodied majority, may not even understand ourselves. For the disabled have something to teach us, not only about themselves, but about the human condition we all share. They teach us to question our assumptions about what makes life worth living. They teach us the difference between a demoralizing pity and a mobilizing compassion. Most of all, they teach us that a patronizing pseudosympathy toward those who are different from “the normal” may be nothing more than a way of defending oneself against the unpleasant truth that all human beings are fragile and vulnerable.

Excerpted from an editorial by  
Richard B. Steel, Editor *Seasons*,  
Volumn 5, Number 2, April, 1986

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## BEATITUDES FOR SPECIAL PEOPLE

BLESSED ARE YOU who take time to listen to difficult speech, for you can help us to know that if we persevere we can be understood.

BLESSED ARE YOU who walk with us in public places, and ignore the stares of strangers, for in your friendship we feel good to be ourselves.

BLESSED ARE YOU who never bid us to “hurry up” and, more blessed, you who do not snatch our tasks from our hands to do them for us, for often we need time rather than help.

BLESSED ARE YOU who stand beside us as we enter new and untried ventures, for our unsureness will be outweighed by the times when we surprise ourselves and you.

BLESSED ARE YOU who ask for our help and realize our giftedness for our greatest need is to be needed.

BLESSED ARE YOU who help us with the graciousness of Christ, for often we need the help we cannot ask for.

BLESSED ARE YOU when, by all things, you assure us that what makes us individuals is not our particular disability or difficulty but our beautiful God-given personhood which no handicapping condition can confine.

REJOICE AND BE EXCEEDINGLY GLAD for your understanding and love have opened doors for us to enjoy life to its fullest and you have helped us believe in ourselves as valued and gifted people.

*Seasons*, Volumn 5, Number 3  
September, 1986