

[return to religion-online](#)

The New Being by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. The New Being was published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1955. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

Chapter 20: Our Ultimate Concern

Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

LUKE 10:88-42

The words Jesus speaks to Martha belong to the most famous of all the words in the Bible. Martha and Mary have become symbols for two possible attitudes towards life, for two forces in man and in mankind as a whole, for two kinds of concern. Martha is concerned about many things, but all of them are finite, preliminary, transitory. Mary is concerned about one thing, which is infinite, ultimate, lasting.

Martha's way is not contemptible. On the contrary, it is the way which keeps the world running. It is the driving force which preserves and enriches life and culture. Without it Jesus could not have talked to Mary and Mary could not have listened to Jesus. Once I heard a sermon dedicated to the justification and glorification of Martha. This can be done. There are innumerable concerns in our lives and in human life generally which demand attention, devotion, passion. But they do not demand *infinite* attention, *unconditional* devotion, *ultimate* passion. They are important, often very important for you and for me and for the whole of mankind. But they are not *ultimately* important. And therefore Jesus praises not Martha, but Mary. She has chosen the right thing, the one thing man needs, the only thing of ultimate concern for every man.

The hour of a church service and every hour of meditative reading is dedicated to listening in the way Mary listened. Something is being said to us, to the speaker as well as to the listeners, something about which we

may become infinitely concerned. This is the meaning of every sermon. It shall awaken infinite concern.

What does it mean to be concerned about something? It means that we are involved in it, that a part of ourselves is in it, that we participate with our hearts. And it means even more than that. It points to the way in which we are involved, namely, *anxiously*. The wisdom of our language often identifies concern with anxiety. Wherever we are involved we feel anxiety. There are many things which interest us, which provoke our compassion or horror. But they are not our real concern; they do not produce this driving, torturing anxiety which is present when we are genuinely and seriously concerned. In our story, Martha was seriously concerned. Let us try to remember what gives us concern in the course of an average day, from the moment of awakening to the last moment before falling asleep, and even beyond that, when our anxieties appear in our dreams.

We are concerned about our work; it is the basis of our existence. We may love it or hate it; we may fulfill it as a duty or as a hard necessity. But anxiety grasps us whenever we feel the limits of our strength, our lack of efficiency, the struggle with our laziness, the danger of failure. We are concerned about our relationships to others. We cannot imagine living without their benevolence, their friendship, their love, their communion in body and soul. But we are worried and often in utter despair when we think about the indifference, the outbursts of anger and jealousy, the hidden and often poisonous hostility we experience in ourselves as well as in those we love. The anxiety about losing them, about having hurt them, about not being worthy of them, creeps into our hearts and makes our love restless. We are concerned about ourselves. We feel responsible for our development towards maturity, towards strength in life, wisdom in mind, and perfection in spirit. At the same time, we are striving for happiness, we are concerned about our pleasures and about "having a good time," a concern which ranks very high with us. But our anxiety strikes us when we look at ourselves in the mirror of self-scrutiny or of the judgments of others. We feel that we have made the wrong decision, that we have started on the wrong road, that we are failing before men and before ourselves. We compare ourselves with others and feel inferior to them, and we are depressed and frustrated. We believe that we have wasted our happiness either by pursuing it too eagerly and confusing happiness with pleasure or by not being courageous enough to grasp the right moment for a decision which might have brought us happiness.

We cannot forget the most natural and most universal concern of everything that lives, the concern for the preservation of life—for our daily bread. There was a time in recent history in which large groups in the Western world had almost forgotten this concern. Today, the simple concern for food and clothing and shelter is so overwhelming in the greater part of mankind that it has almost suppressed most of the other human concerns, and it has absorbed the minds of all classes of people.

But, someone may ask, do we not have higher concerns than those of our daily life? And does not Jesus Himself witness to them? When He is moved by the misery of the masses does He not consecrate the social concern which has grasped many people in our time, liberating them from many worries of their daily lives? When Jesus is moved by pity for the sick and heals them, does He not thereby consecrate the concern shared by medical and spiritual healers? When He gathers around Him a small group in order to establish community within it, does He not thereby consecrate the concern about all communal life? When He says that He has come to bear witness to the truth, does He not consecrate the concern for truth, and the passion for knowledge which is such a driving force in our time? When He is teaching the masses and His disciples, does He not consecrate the concern for learning and education? And when He tells the parables, and when He pictures the beauty of nature and creates sentences of classic perfection, does He not consecrate the concern for beauty, and the elevation of mind it gives, and the peace after the restlessness of our daily concerns?

But are these noble concerns the "one thing" that is needed and the right thing that Mary has chosen? Or are they perhaps the highest forms of what Martha represents? Are we still, like Martha, concerned about many things even when we are concerned about great and noble things?

Are we really beyond anxiety when we are socially concerned and when the mass of misery and social injustice, contrasted with our own favored position, falls upon our conscience and prevents us from breathing freely and happily while we are forced to heave the sighs of hundreds of people all over the world? And do you know the agony of those who want to heal but know it is too late; of those who want to educate and meet with stupidity, wickedness and hatred; of those who are obliged to lead and are worn out by the people's ignorance, by the ambitions of their opponents, by bad institutions and bad luck? These anxieties are greater than those about our daily life. And do you know what tremendous anxiety is connected with every honest inquiry, the anxiety about falling into error, especially when one takes new and untrod paths of thought? Have you ever experienced the almost intolerable feeling of emptiness when you turned from a great work of art to the demands, ugliness and worries of your daily life? Even this is not the "one thing" we need as Jesus indicated when He spoke of the beauties of the Temple being doomed to destruction. Modern Europe has learned that the millennia of human creativity of which it boasted were not that "one thing needful," for the monuments of these millennia now lie in ruins.

Why are the many things about which we are concerned connected with worry and anxiety? We give them our devotion, our strength, our passion and we must do so; otherwise we would not achieve anything. Why, then, do they make us restless in the deepest ground of our hearts, and why does Jesus dismiss them as not ultimately needed?

As Jesus indicates in His words about Mary, it is because they can be taken from us. They all come to an end; all our concerns are finite. In the short span of our lives many of them have already disappeared and new ones have emerged which also will disappear. Many great concerns of the past have vanished and more will come to an end, sooner or later. The melancholy law of transitoriness governs even our most passionate concerns. The anxiety of the end dwells in the happiness they give. Both the things about which we are concerned and we ourselves come to an end. There will be a moment—and perhaps it is not far away—when we shall no longer be concerned about any of these concerns, when their finitude will be revealed in the experience of our own finitude—of our own end.

But we maintain our preliminary concerns as if they were ultimate. And they keep us in their grasp if we try to free ourselves from them. Every concern is tyrannical and wants our whole heart and our whole mind and our whole strength. Every concern tries to become our ultimate concern, our god. The concern about our work often succeeds in becoming our god, as does the concern about another human being, or about pleasure. The concern about science has succeeded in becoming the god of a whole era in history, the concern about money has become an even more important god, and the concern about the nation the most important god of all. But these concerns are finite, they conflict with each other, they burden our consciences because we cannot do justice to all of them.

We may try to dismiss all concerns and to maintain a cynical unconcern. We determine that nothing shall concern us any more, except perhaps casually, but certainly not seriously. We try to be unconcerned about ourselves and others, about our work and our pleasures, about necessities and luxuries, about social and political matters, about knowledge and beauty. We may even feel that this unconcern has something heroic about it. And one thing is true: It is the only alternative to having an ultimate concern. Unconcern or ultimate concern—those are the only alternatives. The cynic is concerned, passionately concerned, about one thing, namely, his unconcern. This is the inner contradiction of all unconcern. Therefore, there is only one

alternative, which is ultimate concern.

What, then, is the one thing that we need? What is the right thing that Mary has chosen? Like our story, I hesitate to answer, for almost any answer will be misunderstood. If the answer is "religion," this will be misunderstood as meaning a set of beliefs and activities. But, as other New Testament stories show, Martha was at least as religious as Mary. Religion can be a human concern on the same level as the others, creating the same anxiety as the others. Every page of the history and psychology of religion demonstrates this. There are even special people who are supposed to cultivate this particular human concern. They are called by a highly blasphemous name: religionists—a word that reveals more about the decay of religion in our time than does anything else. If religion is the special concern of special people and not the ultimate concern of everybody, it is nonsense or blasphemy. So we ask again, what is the one thing we need? And again it is difficult to answer. If we answer "God," this will also be misunderstood. Even God can be made a finite concern, an object among other objects; in whose existence some people believe and some do not. Such a God, of course, cannot be our ultimate concern. Or we make Him a person like other persons with whom it is useful to have a relationship. Such a person may support our finite concerns, but He certainly cannot be our ultimate concern.

The one thing needed—this is the first and in some sense the last answer I can give—is to be concerned ultimately, unconditionally, infinitely. This is what Mary was. It is this that Martha felt and what made her angry, and it is what Jesus praises in Mary. Beyond this, not much has been said or could be said about Mary, and it is less than what has been said about Martha. *But Mary was infinitely concerned.* This is the one thing needed.

If, in the power and passion of such an ultimate concern, we look at our finite concerns, at the Martha sphere of life, everything seems the same and yet everything is changed. We are still concerned about all these things but differently—the anxiety is gone! It still exists and tries to return. But its power is broken; it cannot destroy us any more. He who is grasped by the one thing that is needed has the many things under his feet. They concern him but not ultimately, and when he loses them he does not lose the one thing he needs and that cannot be taken from him.

Viewed 308859 times.