

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1979)
Heft: 1757

Artikel: Swiss national day of prayer
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691676>

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SWISS NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER

The third Sunday of September has for a long time been the Swiss National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving and is still kept a special day all over Switzerland. Do you feel as uneasy about it as I do? Once a year, we Swiss, Catholics and Protestants, Christians and non-Christians, believers and unbelievers should celebrate or at least respect together a day of Prayer. Is this a sign that we are aware that, after all, prayer could be a national concern, that it could bring people of different faiths and languages together and form them into a community? Or is it an outdated relic of the past, a nationalism or patriotism with a strongly built in religious element to provide stability, a paternalistic interference with a private concern? Do we Swiss still honestly believe that prayer is a living force that could help us to find and understand each other and make us one? True enough, our National Anthem with words and music of two romantics, (Leonard Widmer and Alberich Zwyssig, 1842) says so. But do we not feel somehow embarrassed whenever we sing it outside a church hall and try desperately to find something else?

Since I have the audacity to put this question into words, I should also try to give an honest answer. So

I invite you to an excursion of the Spirit in a true Swiss-way which can only be to our mountains, since there is hardly any Swiss who does not love them.

Getting up in the middle of night, by the light of the moon and the stars (or a powerful torch), following the experienced guide is a common experience for a mountaineer. Well known is the steep ascent, the thin air, the cold, the fatigue and sweat which makes him forget all theories and troubles of the past and forces him to concentrate on step by step, on stones and rocks and ice, to be aware of all the present difficulties and dangers, no talk and no daydreams, but an overall awareness of the surroundings and his comrades. It all comes naturally, with training. The higher they get, the slower the pace, the sharper the attention, for hours with some rest in between, finally the last and steepest slope and then the top, a happy smile, a handshake, a proud feeling, we have made it — and then silence, the eyes drink in the beauty of the panorama, and then it happens — sunrise — every mountain peak in golden light — and then the red fireball turning into shining gold — grand and majestic and you feel small and tiny, overwhelmed, and

still part of it, watching with eyes and ears and skin, being one with your friends and the world around you, not wanting to talk, but you could sing and shout with joy "My God, how great!". You would not even be ashamed of singing the national Anthem: "Trittst im Morgenrot daher . . ." It would make sense, even if you were an atheist. You would shun any theories, they would spoil the experience. You feel alive and free — you feel Swiss and would not mind an Italian or African near you — being one with all — part of the universe — human — one with God.

Of course, soon comes the dangerous descent — back into the valley and to everyday life. But you will take home an unforgettable experience, which gives you strength for weeks or months. You will try to put it into words, let your friends down in the valley share it — and you can't. Some may politely share your happiness, a few who have had a similar experience will understand. Others, probably the majority, might think you are mad. And you will be silent about it but for those who understand. But you may well be hooked and long for a next occasion!



Church in the Lötschental

Psychologists may call it an overwhelming emotional upheaval brought about by the contrast of extreme effort and toil and concentration and its following restful relaxation together with some sunlight and exposure. But deep down you will know better, it was a flash of light into a deeper dimension of reality, a short expansion of your conscious self, an insight deeper than thought, something you could not make, it happened, took hold of you.

I am tempted to go even further and call it a religious experience which may well have inspired Leonard Widmer to write the poem which is now our National Anthem. Let us not go too deeply into speculation. But it is a fact that such an experience has all the elements which are ascribed by experts to deep religious prayer, which are a hard ascetic discipline, a deep sense of presence and awareness without distortion by rational thought and memory and prejudice (remember how thought and memories of the past can distort the power of observation and seriously bias the experience of life). Real prayer helps to a deep conviction and awareness of being one with reality, the human family, the universe and God, and its result is a very practical sense for the realities of life and its responsibilities, no shying away from difficulties and toil,

it makes man more human and gives a deeper insight and spiritual vision. It is a real art worth practising, even if one does not reach its ultimate possibilities.

This is not pious talk or wishful thinking. In America, Russia, China, Japan and India scientists are working very intensively to find out more about the hidden powers of man's mind and a new science of enlarged consciousness through concentration and meditation is emerging and will have a say in the future — in spite of the many absurdities and of much nonsense which is offered in our present time under the name of eastern mysticism, which always goes with every important breakthrough in the field of human development. The new art of concentration and meditation can lead to a deeper understanding of the hidden powers of the human mind — and used with reverence and responsibility can become a great blessing — or a powerful weapon of manipulation and destruction.

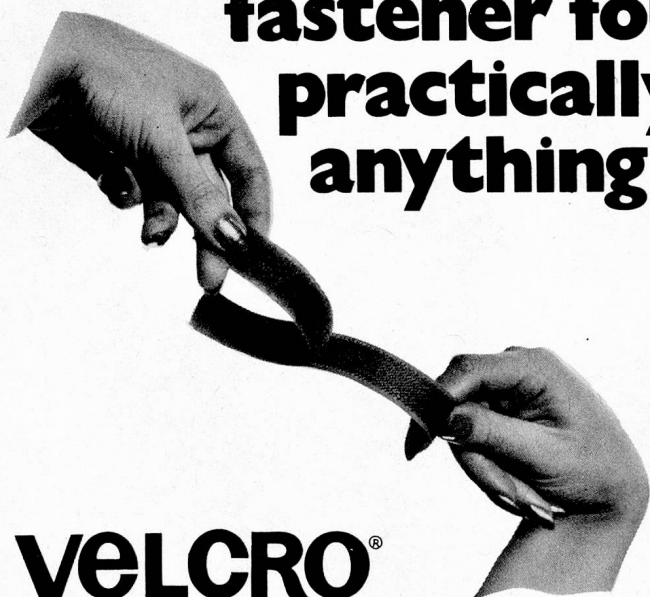
Why do I write this in connection with our National Day of Prayer? I simply want to make you aware of the realities and the very practical consequences of prayer in our everyday life. If Christ did attach such importance to it, he knew exactly what he was talking about and if the churches and all religious

groups practise it and talk about it, they at least believe in a reality of great consequence — some of them talk from own experience. If our National Day of Prayer helps us to a deeper understanding of prayer and of our life and helps us to get rid of the childish prejudice that prayer is an escape from reality, asking God to do things for you, and even believe that he would, it will have done us a great service. We then would grow in the knowledge that we work with God, thus setting free the hidden resources within ourselves, and instead of fretting with worries and being tense with stress and excuses, we would slowly experience an inner strength that flows out of a relaxed belief in God in the centre of our life and our self.

If our Lord (John. 7, 38) says: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me! Let the man come and drink. Who believes in me, from his breast shall flow fountains of living water!" He speaks of real life and his word is valid and tells us something important for the present time. But how do we go about it, what have we got to do, to find out for ourselves? . . . To listen to this word very carefully and to have a desire to find out, to search for it, will certainly be a step in the right direction. Do we have time for that? . . . Is it worth so much for us, that we find or make the time for that?

Paul Bossard

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