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Alertness

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Three times our seasoned British guide warned us about pickpockets in the Paris Metro. Just before entering the subway, he gave us last-minute instructions--keep together, watch out for one another, be aware of strangers around us.

I was walking close beside my husband. As we moved toward the train, the guide suddenly sprang into action. "I saw that!" this affable, unflappable Englishman bellowed. Spewing a stream of accusations to an unseen assailant, he barked at his charges, "Get on the train!" Not until our intrepid guide boarded and a glowering figure spat ferociously into his face did we see the pickpocket. The doors closed and the train pulled away. After a few moments, the guide told the group he'd seen the person's hand actually in one of the men's pockets. Did we know whose? No.

It was my husband's! We were stunned. He hadn't felt a thing. Nor had the thief been able to take anything. But it was unnerving.

My husband and I thought we were being vigilant. We were consciously striving to be alert, to defend one another and our group. Yet, we were deceived. It was at that moment that I realized that there is alert ... and there is ALERT. We needed to increase our level of alertness by several degrees. And we did. The next day we aborted a pickpocket attempt outside Notre Dame.

As I write this, America is on alert. Nightly news warns that further terrorist activities are a certainty. It's only the when and where that seem unknown. So perhaps it is appropriate for all of us to step up our mental alertness from alert to ALERT. The small incident in the Metro reminded me that we need to do three things to increase alertness:

- Be focused, not fearful.
- Uncover the means and methods of evil designed to deceive.
- Act with moral courage.

Be focused, not fearful. Fear is the friend of the enemy. Anxiety weakens resolve and puts well-meaning watchers to sleep. No one wants to be counted among the silent and sleepy when faced with malice. But we can gain courage and wisdom by focusing our thoughts, not on fear, but on the divine power of God. To focus is to have a clear perception. A clearer perception of God comes from a spiritual view, not human vision. God isn't a glorified mortal raining destruction and death on His enemies. God is the power of Life and health, available to help and heal. God is the ultimate, absolute Truth, able to remove ignorance and show how to overcome sin. God is unquenchable Love, ready to free men and women from prisons of thought as they acknowledge and follow divine law. Realizing something of God's divine nature, we can distinguish more consistently between what is trustworthy and what is merely manipulative.

Uncover the means and methods of evil designed to deceive. One of my favorite Bible chapters is Ephesians 4. After talking about the entirety of God and the nature of God's creation, the writer adds a caution that we "be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (4:14). This is a reminder to me not to ignore evil while I strive to understand more of the good nature of God.

Evil is the perversion of good. This perversion of good twists the truth to achieve its own ends. Today, as in Bible times, one of the tricks of evil is to deny that the spiritual message from God to men and women heals physical illness and saves from all sorts of difficulties. This message, the Christ, comes from divine Love. It uplifts humankind right here on earth. Jesus, called the Son of God, had an unlimited awareness of this message. The Christ is still present here and now to heal and save.

Another trick of evil makes you blame yourself for another's violence and destructiveness. An example would be a wife believing she was the cause of her husband's violent outburst, or a child thinking he was responsible for his parents' getting divorced. A need for one person's moral progress doesn't justify someone else's oppression.

One other trick of evil is to promise benefits for submitting to its demands, and severe punishment if one doesn't acquiesce. But submission to evil only promotes more evil. It doesn't result in good. Praying silently to the one, all-powerful God can strengthen your conviction in God's power and reveal ways to avoid becoming a victim of malice. Submission to Truth and Love is what blesses and protects.

Act with moral courage. The effect of increased alertness is improved action. On more than one occasion, my praying and silently affirming the presence of God have neutralized and removed violence and physical threats. This prayer has involved my perceiving good as supreme and my fellow men and women as created in the image of God. A potential rapist left my home within minutes of threatening me. Irrational and possibly violent street people have grown calm. Increased alertness to the workings of evil caused me to realize I was being followed one evening and led me not to drive into our country lane. I later learned who had been following me and confronted them. There was no further intimidation.

While these incidents are not on the scale of terrorist attacks, increasing alertness on the individual level can promote the ability and willingness to be more alert in ways that promote the national and international welfare. Mary Baker Eddy urged people to resist evil by not empowering it or acting on it. She once wrote, "To be delivered from believing in what is unreal [i.e. evil], from fearing it, following it, or loving it, one must watch and pray that he enter not into temptation-even as one guards his door against the approach of thieves" (Message to The Mother Church for 1901, p. 14).

That subway incident was a wake-up call for me. It jolted me out of self-satisfied complacency regarding my level of alertness. Now, I'm praying to be ALERT -- and to do my part to help other people discern God's guidance, which helps us resist and destroy evil.