

Kaleidoscope

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Antiques

I found it.

– Lying between a
cracked gravy boat
china flowers faded
gilt edging flaked
and a bowl of
dusty marbles
each globe once bright
and color-full
as a child's eye
now dull brown
finely sprinkled
in dust and maybe
ashes.

But I found it.

– Even then I lifted it
reverently
waiting to see
what I held
as if I had never
seen the like.
And maybe I hadn't.
Dark in shadow
dusty dull
I lifted it
to the sun
and found I held
a crimson glass
a chalice for flame
faceted to scatter
light not of fire
but of Presence.

I found it.

– Amidst shelves of
dishes boxes of
clutter remnants of
riches I found a
lamp to realize a
fire to comfort a
flicker to remember
dancing flame
beautiful simplicity
dancing joy
glorious Presence
the secret always
waiting unhidden
upon every dusty
shelf that there
is One
who finds.

Asking the Right Questions

The question is not . . .

Do you bow your head before you eat?

but rather,

Do you bow your knees before your Father?

The question is not . . .

Do you curse when you're mad?

but rather,

Do you bless when you're angry?

The question is not . . .

How many times did you go to confession last year?

but rather,

Have you confessed your sin today?

The question is not . . .

Do you go to church on Sunday?

but rather,

Are you the church every day?

The question is not . . .

Do you read your Bible?

but rather,

Do you obey God's Word?

The question is not . . .

Did you take communion this month?

but rather,

Do you have communion with Jesus?

The question is not . . .

What did you do for Christ last year?

but rather,

What are you doing for him today?

The question is not . . .

What we do not do.

but rather,

All that we do.

The question is not . . .

How little we can get by with.

but rather,

How much we can sacrifice.

The answer is not . . .

Whenever it is convenient, and whatever is easy.

but rather,

All that I have, all that I am, every day of my life, with every ounce of my strength.

For we must live for God –

And God alone.

You are the Way

Without you, I am lost,
 disoriented.
I stumble on rocks I cannot see
I fall in snares that hide in darkness.

In a maze of paths
 a labyrinth of choices
I have no wisdom, nor reason.
I only choose the wrong;
 I but compound my errors.
You are my hope,
for you are not only Light for my way
 the Companion on my way
You are my Way.

You are the Truth.

It is not only by the world
I am deceived,
But in my own mind.

I ask questions
 and falsehood answers.
I pursue thoughts
 that only entangle.
I dream dreams
 and they change into nightmares.

It is in your Word
 that my confusion is calmed.
It is in your Wisdom
 that my questions find surcease.
And it is in your Mind
 that I place my trust.

You are the Life.

I am dead.
I walk a corpse, and breathe
 stagnation.
My best actions merely rot
 where they lay,
and I cannot heal myself.

But you – you are the Life.
You breathe into me the breath
 of your Spirit.
You heal my brokenness
 you wash clean my soul.

You give me legs to run
 wings to fly
You fill me with life not only
 here-and-now
But you have given me hope everlasting,
 Life eternal –

You are my Life.

Bubbles

"Mommy! Mommy! Can I have it? Please?"

A child sitting on the steps,
warm sun touching, caressing
arms and face
and the playful wind teasing her hair and
whisking
the myriads of bubbles in swirling races
of bubble and bubble
and bubble and child
as she dances,
her hands outstretched
to catch the incarnation of her
joyous laughter.

"I'll be outside for a while."

She is a young dreamer
standing quietly on the steps.
A slow stream of bubbles
is released into the sultry air
and then cut off
as her eyes track
each rainbow wanderer
in its flight
rise
and descent.
Each fades from reality into a world
she cannot see
but imagines and longs for
in the stillness
and excitement of her soul.

"I am here."

Her finger wipes the dust
off the old bottle
and she tentatively raises
the ring to her lips,
allowing
a single bubble
to escape.
The chill air soon takes the life
from the fragile craft
and a swirling tear falls to the
ground in final tribute.
Tears sting in her own eyes and the
silence begs for redemption.
Winter is coming and
I look toward the eternal –
to the season that welcomes
Bubbles.

The Wilderness

I know the manna in the wilderness.
I have tasted it
lived on it
gathered it
and while the children of Israel
were wrong to grumble
I understand them.
I have grumbled, too.

Manna is the trickle of God's grace
sustaining life
in the wilderness.
It is daily bread
daily breath
daily life line.
And in the beginning
when our tender feet are bleeding
this grace is
sweet as honey
and we hungrily
fall upon it.

But you know –
it can't be stored.
Grace rots in hoarded memory.
It is fresh only
with the dew.

And for a while
we daily wait
and find he is faithful
faithful grace
honey-sweet manna.
Nourishing every day
but it is day
by day.

And we fret.
And are anxious.

But we learn.

I understand Israel's grumbling.
I, too, want more than daily bread.
I want security: not trust.
I want a stocked refrigerator –
not the daily gathering on hands
and knees
for daily bread.

But then, while the grumbling
was wrong there remains
something right.
For God did not destine us
for manna.
Manna is the sweet and satisfying
foretaste
of the promised Land.
Daily grace whets our appetite
for the river flowing
down the streets
of New Jerusalem.
Manna is the simple, quiet teacher
that disciplines us in strength
to enter Canaan.
Sustaining
teaching
promising
that the Manna is but a moment

and the Banquet is forever.

Politically Correct

They said he was
“ethically damaged.”
Some small matter of his statements
not corresponding to reality.

Then there was the trivial situation
involving trivial amounts of money.
But possession is nine-tenths of the law
and he was most certainly in possession.

There was a question as to the propriety
in which various affairs of state were conducted.
However, private acts have no correlation
to public conduct.

Some alleged that his view of his constituency
was that they constituted his guaranteed income.
The voice of the people had spoken in election;
they need say no more until he retired.

All told, there was concern that he was
“ethically damaged.”
But there was no dispute that he was
politically correct.

Child's Prayer

When I grow up
I want to be a tree.
With tall, spreading branches –
and helicopters!
that will whirl down from me
when the wind blows.

I want to be a seagull
and fly above the blue
and frothy foam,
and swells and waves –
and soar
and dive.

I want to be a bunny.
I want to nibble violets
and I want my whiskers
to touch grass blades.
I want to hop through pine
and sit in oak shade.

Untitled I

Yes, I understand you.

I understand the borderland of things
the reality that becomes unfocused
at the edge of your mind.

I understand the step you are
half-terrified
half-wish to take.

I understand the strength of your mind
frenzied in its desire
too strong to break
yet breaking beneath the load it carries.

I understand the depth of sense.

I understand the heights only you
seem to climb to –
unbelievable communion
intoxicating songs.

I understand the fury –
not at the everyday
but at the shallow.

And I understand the engulfing sorrow
the turgid whirlpool
that no one seems to comprehend
except you.

It is there – here – that I speak.

I understand the confined rage
the hidden tears
the taut hands raised to heaven.

I understand the ceaseless cries
the unwillingness to be silent
or to be hopeless.

For you who would ride on the wings of the dawn –
I understand.

I understand the loneliness of the night.

Mist and Sunlight

Watching. Just watching.
Swift flowing, the water glides and flies
to its joyful plummet
Throwing surging spray lightward
Catching and reflecting in a brilliant fountain
Downward with exulting abandon
an evermoving, white water lace
to grace the deep and shadowed green
that hides as a cup of life between walls
of curving, vertical rock.

Watching. Just watching.
This is incomprehensible. My finite, closed,
feeble mind looks and sees;
sees as in a picture
sees as in a book
sees as in a painting
Cannot see at all. Blinded. Blinded.
Blinded.
I see only the mist, dancing free in the sunlight.
That I see. That I understand.

Looking. And crying.
Deep in my soul and welling up to my heart.
I see the mist, Father,
and I know that it must come
from the waterfall.
God, forgive me, I cannot yet see the waterfall.
Then look, my precious child, the waterfall sends
the mist to caress your face. Could you understand the
mist without the fall? Must you understand the fall
to accept the mist?
It is in accepting that you begin to understand.

The Manger and the Star

This dramatic dialogue is set up between two speakers: Speaker 1 restores the human element to the poetic passages quoted by Speaker 2. They begin on opposite sides of the stage.

Speaker 1:

It was hard to believe what the angel said – that God Himself would come to dwell among men, and that He would do so as a man, born out of my body [touch abdomen]. Joseph turned his back on me and would have divorced me . . . though a kinder fate than stoning, which would have been his right from what it seemed. He wonders now, and sometimes he gives a glance of awe at the woman he took as his wife, yet he knows I am not perfect. [hurt] He supported me when my family didn't understand, and when . . . when the women I saw day after day assumed I carried some other man's son. What a world this tiny Babe was born into! One . . . like us.

Speaker 2:

My soul exalts the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has had regard
 for the humble state of His bonds slave;
For behold, from this time on all generations
 will count me blessed.
For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is His name.
And His mercy is upon generation after generation
Toward those who fear Him.
He has done mighty deeds with His arm;
He has scattered those who were proud
 in the thoughts of their heart.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones,
And has exalted those who were humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things;
And sent away the rich empty-handed.
He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his offspring forever.

Speaker 1:

We were the outcasts in society – the ones who were scorned as non-religious rustics. Scorned because we didn't keep the Sabbath. Well, sheep don't keep the Sabbath. Scorned because we

were uneducated. It's hard to be educated unless they bring the synagogue to the fields. Scorned because we didn't join in the festivals. And yet we were raising the very sheep they used in the Temple sacrifices and Passover meals. There. Outside Bethlehem. But someone – Someone thought we were worthy . . .

Speaker 2:

Do not be afraid! For behold, I bring you good news of great joy – which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you shall find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Rejoice and sing! Glory to God in the highest! and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased! [point in direction of shepherd]

Speaker 1:

My wife bore a child not my own, and yet, it is no other man's. The baby she gave birth to is a tiny life placed in my hands – and it is my hands that are to guide, teach, and comfort a child named Jesus: God is salvation. My wife and I shall share the toil, and the joy, of raising a child who is . . . and shall ever be [wonder] . . . the Son of God.

Speaker 2:

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. And see! The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Speaker 1:

Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east, and have come to worship him . . . And so we knelt before a Baby, and adored this Child. I gave gold, for I saw a scepter in His hands. My friend placed there frankincense, for he beheld a High Priest to come – One who would intercede for all men, for He would offer . . . would offer Himself. And so our third companion gave myrrh, and his sorrowing eyes beheld a dark day that must soon come – before the joy that we cannot understand, but look for.

Speaker 2:

It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob,
and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

[walk closer together]

Speaker 1:

But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah –

[side by side]

Speaker 2:

From you One will go forth for Me to be Ruler in Israel.

Both together:

His goings forth are from long ago,

From the days of eternity.

Pitching Tents

“He came and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14)

That is how we read it. “He abided with us.” And indeed, the thought is fantastic: amazing. That God Himself should come to dwell among his people. But were we to read closer, we would find that John had even more in mind in that unbelievable verse.

The Greek word calls to mind a picture image: it is not only that God should visit with his people. He did not appear as some Olympian demigod, clothed in splendor and departing at whim in a cloud of golden dust. Instead, he came “and pitched his tent among us.” He was willing to live with us. To pitch his tent with the sweat of his hands and the strain of his back; to set aside the riches of heaven and become a nomad with his nomadic people, who had wandered so far from his love.

It is the fantastic fulfillment of those four blessed words: “The Word became flesh.” He became flesh. And as he did so, he came and pitched his tent among us. Nothing would keep him from his lost sheep. Not flesh. Not poverty. Not even death.

Yet there is something else there . . . the ghost of a remembrance, the whisper of everything the people of Israel had once heralded with trumpets. It comes in that small phrase which follows the crescendo of the Word becoming flesh, of Jesus Christ come to dwell among the tents of his people. And that is, that “we beheld his glory . . .” The two images, coming as they do back to back, separated only by a breath, complete the picture that John sets forth: lest we in any fashion forget who it is that has come among us to dwell. “He pitched his tent . . . and we beheld his glory . . .” It is nothing less than the *shekinah* glory of God. For this was not the first time that God had pitched his tent among us. He had already done so, in the form of a tabernacle in the wilderness, a tented temple holy to the Lord, a tent he had inhabited with his glory as a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.

God always seeks to dwell among his people. And when he pitches his tent, he brings his glory with him: the glory of his holiness, the glory of his power, the glory of his love. We, too, are each described as “a temple of the Holy Spirit.” God once again seeking to pitch his tent among us. Once again, now and forever, seeking to bring the fullness of his glory to his beloved children.

Emmanuel

He was the Almighty God,
 laid that night on a bed of straw and wrapped in swaddling clothes.
He was the Bridegroom
 who would die for his bride in order that he might wed her.
He was the Only-Begotten of the Father,
 born in flesh to become the First-Born from the dead.
He was the Lion of Judah,
 clothed in the white fleece of the Lamb of God.
He was the Kinsman-Redeemer,
 who was not ashamed to call us his brothers.
He was the High Priest,
 stretching out his arms to offer the final Sacrifice.

He is God with us –
 now and forevermore.

On Ash Wednesday, 1996, I listened to my co-workers discussing Lent. I was in a position only to listen to, not enter into, that conversation. Later that same day, I wrote down what I had heard—adding only the connecting phrases.

Ash Wednesday

dust to dust.
ashes to ashes.

holy crud! it's ash wednesday!
is it?
it is!
damn, i forgot!

dust to dust.
ashes to ashes.

man, and i already ate breakfast.
so skip lunch.
i can't! that would be wasteful . . .

dust to dust.
ashes to ashes.

you could have told me that
before i had the apple in my mouth.
don't take another bite.
i've done this much,
i might as well finish it.

dust to dust.
ashes to ashes.

you can't turn it on and off
like a tv set.
you either are a catholic
or you aren't.
look who's talking —
you're an atheist.

dust to dust.
ashes to ashes.

i was raised in a strict
catholic home.
i was an altar boy.
but now . . . it seems . . .
i forgot.

dust to dust.
ashes to ashes.

besides, it's such a pain
in spring.
after all, the weather's warm
and you have all those friday night
happy hours.

dust to dust.
ashes to ashes.

well, i suppose i can do without meat.
come off it . . .
it's supposed to be a sacrifice.

dust to dust.
ashes to

Ash Wednesday II

Ash Wednesday does not begin
with words
nor with silence.

It begins with chaos –
 questions tangled in a serpent's knot
 accusations leveled at an omnipotent God
 fury and depression wreaking their alternating destruction.

I do not begin with expectation.
I cannot see lilies blooming
nor anticipate an empty sepulcher.
I cannot even see the thorns
nor hear the dull thud of nails into wood.

I begin with what I am –
 dust to dust
 ashes to ashes.

The dust is the shattered rock
of what I was
or should have been
or might have been.

The ashes are what I am.

I know now that I am mortal
 for my dreams have died
 my hopes lie wrapped in shrouds
 and my faith has been laid
 in the sepulcher.

And so I begin
with chaos.

Lilies

bloomed like trumpet peals
by an empty grave.

What is it that we feel –
when supremacy no longer
can be held in our hands?

What if we are the one
who does not see
the risen in the cemetery?

Does the almighty disappoint.

I cannot attain to
what I must
in order to live.

Mary stood and stooped.

Do I meet grace
or does grace meet me?

Who moved
in the cemetery.

Rebirth

The trees lift their skeletal fingers
heavenward,
their royal robes in tatters
hang upon them
and inevitably
drop to the ground.
Soon bare and naked to
the ravaging winds and cold,
they continue their silent plea to
the Creator to clothe them again in the
delicate green of a new life and
a new hope.

Roll Away the Stone

Sisyphus does not usually tread the dusty streets of Jerusalem. He has never appeared in a Paschal reading, nor was he ever mentioned in an Easter sermon.

But this Easter, I thought of him. That ancient man of Grecian myth, forever doomed to roll the stone of his judgment up the hill, forever doomed to watch it slip from his grasp and tumble to the bottom, just as he struggled to reach the crest.

A man without hope. A man without a future.

I pictured him in my mind: hoary with the eternal passing of time, his back bent and hunched and broken from the weight of the stone. His hands roughened and bleeding from scraping against the unfeeling rock. His clothing torn, dirtied, bloodied. But most of all, his face. The helpless look of an immortal soul. The haunted, desperate emptiness in his eyes. Trapped. Voiceless. Hopeless.

Do you know that look? Have you felt that burning, aching pain?

I know that stone. I have rolled it before me, in different shapes and guises, many times. The stone is my sin. My judgment. The crushing weight of knowing that I failed ... failed my Lord and myself worse than I ever imagined possible. Failed repeatedly. Failed ignominiously. Failed completely.

I condemn myself to rolling that stone before me. I reproach myself day and night for the wickedness, ignorance, or willfulness which led me in the broad path of destruction. I curse my shortsightedness; my blindness.

And the longer I roll that stone before me, the deeper the hurts run.

I question my worth before God. My ability to accomplish anything for him. I doubt that I can make wise decisions ... or perhaps any decisions at all.

My days and nights run together in endless misery. Purpose is gone. Dreams are crushed. Hope is destroyed, trodden down beneath my aching feet.

I long to reach God. To come before him once again. So I push the stone before me ... inch by inch, punishing myself in order to appease what I believe to be his wrath, striving to gain in my own strength the right to stand before him.

And the stone slips.

I watch Sisyphus in my mind's eye. Watch as the stone rolls down the steep hill, gaining momentum as it goes.

His frame trembles with despair. His back, though temporarily not burdened, is still bent. His limbs are crooked from long days and nights, weeks and months, of straining against the stone. His crabbed figure, a tormented silhouette, begins its aching descent down the hill.

I feel for him. I feel with him. In that moment, I am he. I, too, have been grotesquely distorted and tortured by the weight of my sin and my condemnation.

I watch as he makes his painstaking way down the hill. Over grass he cannot feel, beneath a flaming sky he cannot see. For his eyes are blinded. Turned in. Sightless.

The ground levels out, and his breathing grows less hoarse. It is easy to follow the track of the stone ... a deep depression mars the way of its passing.

He stops suddenly, with a sharp intake of breath. The track terminates at the mouth of a cave. But the stone is so large, it could not have gone in it ...yet it is not there. His questioning gaze scans the surroundings uneasily.

And his eyes find the stone. Rolled to the side of the tomb.

The stone has been rolled away.

Rolled away, by a hand not his own.

Set to rest, by an authority above his own.

And a voice from behind him calls his name – my name – and I whirl with new strength and joy to see the One who has rolled away the stone.

Behold, I bring you good news

The words spoken to a virgin,
that she would be looked upon as loose
or at least as hasty.

The promise given to the father of a nation
that he would first have to wait ten years,
then be prepared to take his son's life
with his own hand.

The command issued to Ezekiel
that he would be branded a raving lunatic,
his actions symbolic and his words
incomprehensible.

The whisper to Hosea
to take a whore as his wife
and to love her no matter how many times
she hurt him.

The touch received by Jeremiah
that the people would not listen:
to words, to reason, to love.

The instruction to Elijah
to be fed by outcasts, widows,
and unclean birds.

The call spoken to Peter
that he would be bound and led
and killed.

How we long for the call
the touch
the promise.

Are we prepared to bear
the cost?

“For whoever would save his life
shall lose it;
and whoever would lose his life
for My sake
shall save it.”

The Call of the King

I.

Wake, My soldier, from thy rest,
for the battle rages on.
Wake up thy soul from slumber deep
and ope' thine eyes to see thy keep –
assailed, assaulted on every side
by Satan's guard under Satan's guide.
For we battle not against flesh and blood,
but against an overwhelming flood
that may not visible appear,
nor cry aloud upon thine ear.
So wake, My soldier, see the Son.
Yes, wake, and put His power on.

II.

Hear Me, soldier, lift thy prayers
up to My holy throne.
In all thy joy and all thy pain,
at all thy times let speech not wane;
and for thy fellow man in war –
Press on! and thy petition pour,
for I am waiting and will hear,
yes, all thy cries to Me are dear.
Now be alert at every time –
whatever chance, whatever clime –
and do not let thyself grow cold,
but let thy heart be ever bold.

III.

Take up the armor of thy God
and clothe thyself complete.
For should one evil see thee bare,
he'll fit upon his bow with care
a flaming dart of Satan's make –
to kill or maim or so thee shake.
But if thyself art carefully dressed,
with power thou'lt be ever blest.

And tho' the battle deepens more,
know that thou'lt reach the farther shore,
and hear the words, "Well done, My son,
"The work I gave thee, thou hast done."

IV.

Belt now My truth about thy waist,
and pause from all thy care.
Let the Spirit touch thine eyes
that thou might see the Tempter's lies –
that though he coax with carnal lust
or promise fame's eternal gust
or offer all of earthly rule,
(save that thou be his willing tool)
Do not submit! I charge to thee:
be ever holy unto Me.
Be sanctified this final hour –
enabled through My word and power.

V.

My soldier, now thy rags cast off,
for never could they save.
Yet let thy countenance not fall,
I know thy need and troubles all.
Fear not! for tho' thou naked be,
from hence My rightness shall clothe thee.
It is My honor protects thy parts,
and guards thee from the Serpent's arts.
So stand thee tall and raise thine arm –
go forth in strength and fear no harm;
for should Apollyon draw his sword,
thy breast is under holy ward.

VI.

Next for thy shoes My gospel take,
and harvest wheat from tare.
Take the news to every part,
and heal the aching, lonely heart.
Yet be not prideful: humbly seek
to know the words of grace to speak.

For Satan's nets are subtly lain:
be wary, self can make thee vain.
Search on, forever test thy place –
force thyself to run the race.
For in this running, wear shall yield
shoes of strength and words of steel.

VII.

Now clothed, take up thine weaponry
and battle for thy God.
Let faith protect thee as a shield
so that thy soul may never yield:
no feint to take thee off thy guard
nor thrust to cause thee helpless barred.
Though doubts assail and foes be strong,
let this thy cause of victory song
be now thy sure and quick defense:
the cross thy perfect confidence.
And thou, My son, shall onward go,
to conquer each and every foe.

VIII.

Guard now thy head with crest of gold
and wash thee in My blood.
Free from the debt of deadly sin,
free through the power now within
to blameless stand before My throne,
taking My call to be thine own.
The Accuser may no longer come,
for the cross and for the One
who hangs accursed upon the tree
has brought His holiness to thee.
And now His Name upon thy brow
shall be the seal of My vow.

IX.

Now take thy sword from out its sheath
and keep its edge fine honed.
Choose from thy well-worn book of life
the cuts thou needst to end the strife.

Go forth and know that this thine blade
was forged in truth, by My hand made
to be thine only weapon, yet
to conquer every foe that's set
against thee by thine Enemy –
and is full proof 'gainst even he.
Remember that this war is won
and was so by My sword and Son.

Behold the Man

Are you the Man
who taught multitudes on the mountain?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who healed the paralytic?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who touched the leper?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who gave sight to the blind?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who ate with publicans?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who had compassion on harlots?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who freed the demon-possessed?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who calmed the storm?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who raised the dead?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who taught the love of God?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who showed love toward man?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who wept over Jerusalem?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who cleansed the Temple?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who entered Jerusalem on a colt?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who spoke peace in the Garden?

You have said that it is so.

Are you the Man
who is the Son of the Blessed One?

You have said that it is so.

Take him out.
And kill him.

Beholding the Light

For a beggar –
he certainly did not excel
in humility.
For a blind man –
he certainly saw more clearly
than most.
For a sinner –
he would not budge
from the perimeter
of the Temple.

Jesus found him there.
After teaching
that he was Light
after teaching
that he would die
after teaching
that he was Life
after teaching
that he was
I AM.

And still, his disciples
stuck their noses in the air
strutted a bit
pointed him out
and asked,
“Rabbi, who sinned? This *one* –”
this object
this thing
this not-quite-a-man
“– or his parents?
That he should be born
blind?”

The man thought
– It is the Pharisees.
Come again
to make me a caricature
an object lesson

a grave reproof.
– They call him *'Rabbi'!*
He turned the word
in bitterness –
and amused resignation –
on his tongue.
The Temple
loomed
at his back.
And he waited
for the catalogue of sins.

“Neither.”

Neither?
The blind man sat
bolt upright
ears straining to catch
every nuance
every word
to commit to memory
the tone
the timbre
the depth
of that voice.

“It was so that the works
of God
might be displayed –
in *him.*”

Tears glistened.
All these years?
To God's glory?
His faithfulness with all the
nothing
he had
had *not* gone
unseen?
The Temple at his back
was not blind?
He rejoiced.
And had the voice

passed on
he would still
and for all his life
have rejoiced.

But the voice did not pass on.
“While I am in the world
I am the Light of the world.”

The next moment
gentle hands gave body
to that gentle voice.
A daub of clay applied
to each
sightless eye.

“Go. Wash in the pool
of the Sent.”

Sent?
Wash in the pool
of the *Running*.

His blind hands could not force
fast enough
through jostling crowds
begging again
not food, not money
but direction
until he came
at last
to the crystal pool
plunged his hands
brought up living water
baptized his face –

and opened his eyes.

His voice could be heard
in every street
over vendors and children
over animals and hecklers –
the Temple incarnate

had touched his eyes
the Lord of the Sabbath
had finally given rest.

But there were
of course
the Pharisees.

“What happened?”

“He put clay on my eyes
bid me wash
and I see.”

“He breaks the sabbath.”

“No,” thought the man with a smile.
“He is the Sabbath.”

“Who do you say that he is?”

The man hesitated.
Despite the witness within, he said,
“A prophet.”
At the very least, he was
the Word of God.

“He is a sinner!”
they challenged him.

Something firmed within.
“Really? Whether he is –
or no –
I was blind
and now I see.”

It was also a challenge.
So they asked again,

“What happened?”
Hoping, perhaps, for
a different Answer.

The (blind) man chuckled.
“Why? Do you also wish
to follow him?”

And in that phrase
‘prophet’ moved closer to
‘Lord.’

“Who knows where he
is from!”
they disparaged him.

“It is a simple syllogism,”
said the man
born blind.
Untutored beggar
from outside
the Temple walls.
“He opened my eyes.
We know that God hears
the righteous
– not sinners –
and even so,
from the beginning
no one
born blind
has ever seen.
If this Man were not
from alongside of
God –
then he could do nothing.”

A glimmering lit his eyes
of a Man
unlike even the prophets.
A Man who was more
than a channel of grace.
A Man who *was* Grace
come from the Throne of Grace
alongside
of God.

The teachers found the teaching
offensive.
So they put him out –
he who had sat so long
without.
Because they could not put out
his words.

Sighted,
he wandered sightlessly
dispirited to have lost
what he had longed most
to gain.

“Do you believe
in the Son of Man?”

The words. The voice.
The tone –
and the eyes.
So gentle. So open.
So full of light.

“Who is he, Lord,
that I may believe in him?”

Crowds had missed it.
Scribes had not understood it.
But the man born blind
understood
that when the Rabbi spoke
of the Son of Man
he spoke truly
of the Son of God.

And so he answered,
“Who is he – *Lord* –
that I may believe in him?”
In his heart he longed
for one Answer
and his lips spoke his faith
before his ears heard
his vindication.

And Jesus smiled.

Like sunlight through the clouds.
Like gold in a vein of clay.
Like laughter above meaningless chaos.

“You have seen him! –”

his voice teased
and blessed
the man’s new-made sight.

“– and he is the one talking
with you.”

a heaven-sent affirmation
of what his sightless ears
had first heard
outside the Temple.
That tone. That timbre.
That unforgettable voice.

And the clay was fully washed
from his sparkling eyes
as he fell to his knees
and his voice rang out,
“*Lord* – I believe!”

Be Still and Know that I am God

Be – Come with who you are, as you are. Come knowing that your personality and individuality are safe. Don't try to empty yourself of your selfhood: rather, acknowledge that selfhood and understand that it is treasured in heaven's eyes.

Still – Having come as yourself, quiet yourself. Not emptiness, but quietness. You spend your days being noisy and hearing noise, and you come with much-needed petitions. But now, come quietly. For the other end of the dialogue.

and – and while you are still . . .

Know – Know. Not “feel,” but know. Knowing goes beyond mental apprehension, strikes deeper than emotional rest. Knowing is another look at the foundation of your heart, a reminder of eternal truths that get lost in temporal chaos. Knowing is trusting the utter safeness of God.

that – know this one thing . . .

I – Being still is turning your focus to me, away from yourself. It is understanding, in sober judgment, your own place at the foot of the throne—and beholding not your unworthiness, but the glory, the presence, the love of the Most High. Worries and cares can be put away for a while in the light of the eternal. I am real, and personal. I am not an abstract thought. I am with you.

Am – I am. I have touched you in the past and have ordained hope for your future, but it is now that I speak with you, meet with you, comfort you. Your worries and cares and joys are in the present, and so am I. Because I am, my presence will always be with you; and here, in your stillness, is where I remind you of that in a special way.

God – For all your needs, I will give grace. To your eternal hopes, I will give reality. In every question, I am your wisdom. For each sin, I grant forgiveness. I am the Alpha and Omega: mystery, light, savior, and life. I love you.

Sentence Prayers

Lord, I pray not for an emotional high, but for steadfastness of soul.

I pray not for happiness, but for joy.

I pray not for forgetfulness, but for the ability to forgive.

I pray not for the end of trials, but for grace in them.

I pray not for pleasure, but for purpose.

I pray not for the cessation of my loved one's struggles, but for their growth through them.

I pray not for a roadmap of my life, but for a light for my path.

I pray not for visions and thunder, but for an ear to hear your still, small voice.

I pray not for the fire to be cooled, but for the crucible to purify.

I pray not for independence, but for brokenness of spirit.

In all these things, I pray not for the quick, nor for the shallow. I pray not for what I want, but for what I need. I will set my eyes beyond my own pain, beyond my own reason, beyond my own understanding, and seek you alone.

And in all these things, I humbly beg your grace, for you alone are the Author and Perfecter of my faith.

Amen.

A Creed for Daily Life

I believe that God is my Father
and I am His child.

I believe that I have right standing with God
because of what Jesus has done,
not because of anything I do.

I believe that Christ is with me,
whether or not I “feel” Him.

I believe that my worth is intrinsic
because I am created in the image of God,
and Jesus died and rose for me.

I believe that God is doing a good work
in and through me,
and that this day is part of it.

I believe that when I confess and repent,
I am completely forgiven.

I believe that the Holy Spirit will lead me through this day,
and will give me grace, strength, and wisdom
as I need it.

I believe that God will provide
for every need I have.

I believe that God holds me securely,
and that nothing can separate me from Him.

Seven Meditations on Grief and Loss

Following are seven meditations on grief and loss. I have purposefully left out any reference to what I experienced that brought on this grieving period—simply because it is grief that is the focus.

This is not a dissertation on grief or a psychological examination of it. It is the lived experience; the image of the soul; the weeping of the spirit. In it, I hope you will find a voice for your own suffering, and hope in our faithful God.

1.

Healing takes place slowly. Like the measured tread of weary feet, the soul struggles to find the equilibrium of normalcy again. Tries to recall what it is to think without pain, to remember without the stab of memory. Faith seems too much a distant dream, and the thought of hope brings only the swirling chill of November air, bleak and grey in the twilight.

And so I walk. Step by step, and step by step. I walk along fields of corn, whose dry husks and stalks rustle and clack softly in the wind. I walk beside trees and see the autumn reds and oranges grow luminescent in the golden hues of the setting sun. I walk on the edge of streams and listen to the chuckle of the water as it skips over stones, and bubbles in festive solitude.

I walk. It is a simple act that reaffirms life. My mind trudges in an endless rut of pain, remembering and hurting, remembering and hurting. Questioning in anguished silence. Ceaselessly re-living the moment of separation: joy lost; dreams destroyed.

But I walk. My eyes, though drawn, can still see color. My soul is lost in the grey land, where stark images of black and fearful white shimmer momentarily before being swallowed up in the never-ending grey. But my eyes can still see the October blue of the sky; can still behold the rich russet of the leaves; can still pause to commit to memory the laughing golds of black-eyed susans seen peeking out between a thousand beige-toned and fluffy-headed grasses.

It is there, imperceptibly, that color begins to return within.

I walk. There is a voice I will never hear again; words held sacred whose syllables will nevermore fall on my ears. Perhaps more than all else, it is that silence which is unbearable. It is with words that we make ourselves known; with words that we understand that incomprehensible reality which is another human soul; with words that we move heaven and earth by swearing an unbreakable commitment before the throne of Jehovah-God.

Is it a wonder, then, that loneliness is spoken of as silence?

But I walk; and crickets chirrup a continuous foundation for my soul to build upon. Deep among the cornstalks, squirrels rustle as they busily forage the hardened kernels. And listening still, high above, killdeer cry with the voice of empty meadows, answered once and rarely by the shrill creel of the wheeling peregrines.

It is the only voice I can hear; the only whisper that can truly comfort.

And so I walk. Each step is a happening; a drop of reality. The curve of the world is solid against the soles of my feet, and its roughness and smoothness anchors the soul of my self. Leaving the path, the dry, cropped grasses crunch under my steps. A pause; a kneel on cold-hardened ground; fingers extend to touch the silken whisper of milkweed wishes, or to pet the barred back of a reluctant woolly bear.

It fills my body. It comforts my hands that will not be held again. It embraces my soul that will not be touched again.

I walk. Step by step, and step by step. And the smell of autumn—the rich humus of leaves returning to the soil with the promise to live again after winter’s frost—fills each deep inhale with the promise that all life shall be re-born. Not without trials, but with the surety of every step.

2.

Milkweed wishes.

Gossamer silk floating unperturbed on the merest breaths of moving air, bearing their burdens of single tear-shaped seeds.

My sister told me solemnly that when you caught a wish and wished upon it, then released it to the wind, if the wish didn’t sink to the ground for as long as you watched it then your wish would come true. And she was older by three and a half years, so she would know.

I still catch wishes. And wish. And watch.

I treat my wishes more lightly than my prayers. For my prayers, I follow the advice of Ecclesiastes: “Guard your steps as you go to the house of God . . . do not be hasty in word, nor impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God, for God is in heaven, and you are on the earth—therefore, let your words be few.” But for my wishes, I tell God the light-hearted, gossamer whims of my heart. Like a child tells her daddy. Knowing that many will never come to be, but enjoying them all the same and enjoying sharing them with her heavenly Father. A trusting hand tucked in the divine.

Like a child, I thought that all wishes should rise up, caught on the wind and carried to flowering fields far beyond my ken. But I have seen the silken threads tangled in grasses, and floating sodden in oil-stained puddles. I have seen the milk-white strands trodden under foot: stamped into the mud to never rise again. I have knelt beside them; and I have wept.

They were only wishes, Daddy—only wishes and dreams and hopes for the young and innocent heart. If they couldn’t come true for real, why did you let them come so close within my grasp? Why give love, and passion, and tenderness, when you knew that in the end, it would be taken from me?

I am afraid, Daddy. Afraid that I will never be able to catch wishes again. Afraid that if I catch one and whisper a wish, it will bring tears to my eyes. Will a wish ever rise from my hand again? Or will they all fall to the ground where I stand, denying both small joys and large?

Will I ever be able to wish with faith and hope again? I am afraid that you give with one hand and take away with the other . . . and in so doing, destroy even the possibility of my taking joy in my carefree wishes ever again.

And what of these, my wishes? My heart is numb, and broken, and frightened. Can once-special things ever be special again? Or will there always be the pain of trampled wishes?

I believe your hand is delicate enough to untangle silken strands from briars and thorns. I believe your touch is careful enough to restore the gossamer threads from out their coating of mud and dirt. I believe your grasp is tender enough to release the wishes to the wind of a gentle Spirit.

I believe in the God of milkweed wishes.

3.

The tree was not simply yellow, nor even autumn gold. Its beauty transcended color, for it *glowed*—a burnished living flame, sunflower hues at the base transforming into a thousand fiery orange-red flickers against a pale grey October sky.

That was, perhaps, the greatest mystery of it. My soul can never drink enough of sunlight streaming through brilliant leaves, nor does the depth of a cloudless autumn sky ever pall. But the day was not bright, nor clear. It was strewn with long, thick grey clouds that crowded so close on the horizon that not a single strip of blue could be seen between them. Yet withal, the sun was throwing slanted rays from behind me onto the tree as if it were the sole object and focus of a Renaissance masterpiece, leaving all the rest of the landscape muted in gentle shadows.

So, too, the voice of the divine. When the soul's landscape is haunted with sorrow, and tears blot out happiness as surely as an overcast sky, it is impossible to hear more than a single word. Strength is not present to comprehend a sermon or exhortation from on high. Doctrine and theological ramifications are meaningless—however appropriate they may be. Even a psalm's length may strain the spirit to the breaking point. Exhaustion is not comprised only of what we can or cannot *do*: it is also a matter of what we can or cannot *hear*.

Isaiah writes wisely that the Servant Messiah sustains the weary one with a word. Not with many words; but with a word. He gathers the weary one in his arms and speaks to him in single words, as they can be heard. To speak more would be to destroy the very thing he desires to build up. But his single spoken words become an anchor to the soul; they become the promise held fast, the tower of refuge to which to run.

Such words glow in the autumn of the soul. They fix the spirit's eye, standing out like a living flame, all the more enchantingly beautiful for standing as they do—in the midst of the grey land.

Mourn. Allow yourself time to be human: frail, weak, too often sinful, but regardless of the circumstances—hurting. Allow yourself all the time you need, all the tears you need, all the upsurging torrent of hopelessness, sorrow, helplessness, and fear that you need. Only those who mourn can be comforted. Only those who have worn sackcloth and ashes will truly be thankful when the divine Servant exchanges those clothes for robes of rejoicing and garlands of joy.

Speak. Never cease to pour out your heart. Questions, doubts, anger, memories, fears, hopes, dreams. Leave nothing unspoken in your heart or it will linger there and fester. No emotion is too terrible, no thought too wild. Grieving and loss leave in their wake a maelstrom

that will only calm and recede as it is accepted and spoken. Because in the single word ‘*speak*’ is another word, silent, but as real as the living pulse in the veins—“*I am listening.*”

Presence. No other word speaks as much as those two syllables. It contains in it the promise of a never failing companion; it places the divine seal on the human life. All hope, all faith, all joy, is based upon that single word. He is Jehovah the Healer, Jehovah the Provider, Jehovah the Shepherd. He is Jehovah: and all that he is, he is because he is *present*. The I AM becomes more than ever in our sorrow the *I AM HERE*.

We are sustained by single words, each word as it is spoken becoming illumined as a single flame-gold tree in a landscape of grey. As these words become emblazoned on our minds and within our souls, we slowly realize what we are truly seeing, and what we truly hear—

One single burnished and glowing Tree.
And one spoken Word.

4.

A bird whistles: high and clear above the late-autumn crickets, calling to the wind that ruffles orange-tipped leaves. And like the bird call—instant, immediate—a smile is brought to my lips. The corners of my eyes crinkle as I picture the tiny fluff of grey feathers, stretching its neck with self-imposed importance to send forth the announcement of its presence. Then, just as quickly, as the sound of the whistle ceases its infinitesimal echo on the breeze, the smile slips and fades. The silence within is magnified by the silence without.

It is the guilt of happiness. The guilt of forgetfulness. The wrenching of the heart that returns in the wake of having—if only for a moment—left behind the pain, the sorrow, the memories that so consistently brood and often torment the mind.

The fleeting smiles and moments of honest, free laughter stab at the heart like a traitor’s wounds . . . surely I cannot forget? surely I have not forgotten? surely to be happy again is to cease to bear the love within my soul, to lay aside the one more precious to me than my own life?

Our divine Father bids us lay aside our garments of mourning and live again, and laugh again. He desires more than all else for a smile to brighten our face and give youth to our heart. But the road from sorrow to happiness is fraught with pain.

My human desire is to hold on: to enshrine the memory of my love and dwell there, keeping it ever before me. How can I let go? Is that not a cheapening and lessening of my love? Dear Father, how much grace I need, in order to understand that letting go is the only way to hold the memories sacred.

Living again in no way lessens the truth and reality and depth of all that has gone before. Being free and happy—to the very core of your soul—does not degrade the memory either of the joy known when your love was still with you, or the pain experienced when your loved one was taken from you. Both the joy and the pain are real and remain a part of the soul forever. But they do not decree that the soul must live in an endless rut of despair dwelling upon a loved one lost or given up, unless that is the course we choose ourselves.

The paradoxical truth is that by letting go, we allow all the good to remain. By letting go, laughing again, smiling again, pain recedes in the memory, as it always does by the grace of God. But the good remains: joys remembered, jokes shared, times spent together. Perhaps they will always be tinged with a touch of sadness, but perhaps not. But this is assured: they will no longer cause the stab of hurt and agony that is present now, in the time given for mourning.

It hurts to smile again. Each smile reminds me of a joy I am not sharing with the one I love. Laughter leaves a deep sense of grief in its wake. Even so, I begin to see that smiles come more frequently, and bring fewer painful memories. Laughter quickens more easily, and lasts longer. The times that I am able to let go lengthen slowly, and I find therein that when I do remember again, it is with more peace, and less pain.

The crickets are still singing in the field, though with fewer and fewer voices after each frosty night. The birds still carol in the trees, and high above, Canadian geese arrow toward warmer climes. I do not doubt that the crickets will have sung another season before I will come to the place where laughter is ready and smiles bright again. To the place where peace and contentment once more are the seals on my heart. For though it still causes pain, I can be happy again. The reality of my love will never fade, and I will carry that with me through my life—but I need not dwell here in the place of grief and mourning. Each smile and laugh takes me one step farther from grief, and one step closer to remembering with peace.

Sing, little bird—help me to smile once more.

5.

I am self-sufficient. I am independent. I pride myself on having complete control over my mind and person. I am addicted to nothing and will not be mastered by anything.

I am also full of quite a dose of self-deception.

Normally, this self-deception glides under the surface: unseen, unbeknownst to myself. I go through life making decisions, whether they be effortless or following a period of serious deliberation. I laugh, I live as the social being that I am, I talk, I listen. I plan, hope, act. In fact, I personify the verse in James that observes, “Tomorrow, I shall go forth and also do this or that;” forgetting all the time that that verse reads as a warning, not a commendation.

Sorrow rips the disguise off my self-reliance. I am not self-sufficient: I am lonely. I am not independent: were it not for my friends and family who have stood fast beside me, I would probably be dead. I do not have complete control over my mind, or even over my emotions: I get caught in the downward spiral of depression and am helpless to free myself from it. I am mastered by circumstances beyond my control that show me to myself all that I am: frail, and fallen, and desperately in need of grace.

Sorrow takes away tomorrow. It leaves an empty today where every minute is endured, not lived. Disappointment, depression, and hopelessness are its close confidantes. From under this assault, I have no chance in my weak humanity to rise above the pain and live again. I despair of ever seeing dreams realized, or experiencing again the abundant life that God above has promised his children.

Into this circling abyss, God has to reach down and take hold of his child. I need his Word, for my soul needs to feed. Sometimes a single phrase is all I can take in: eternity is overwhelming, and even more so when the spirit is in pain. I need his presence. In the blackest times, when my eyes are swollen from crying and my throat is raw from the choking sobs, I need to know the swirling, comforting sense of Jehovah Shammah, the Lord who is Present. I need his peace. Peace of mind, so that I can think through and process all that has happened. Peace of heart, so that I can slowly begin to heal. Peace of spirit, so that the seeds of hope can begin to germinate once again.

He does come. He will not fail to come to his child. The Psalms echo the cry of the brokenhearted, “Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, and the light around me become as night.” Not a cry of one trying to escape the presence of God, but of one who is terrified lest he be separated from the only One who can save him. So comes the divine reassurance, “Even the darkness is not dark to Thee, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to Thee.”

The darkness of sorrow is not overwhelming to him, nor will despair and hopelessness separate us from him. Hope and grace and comfort flow from him and from him alone: they cannot come from within us.

Therefore, it is in that place that we learn humility once again. Begging for daily manna: food enough to survive just one more day. We learn our dependence on the One who is utterly dependable. We come to see that hopes and dreams and wishes are best and clearest and brightest when they flow from the eternal Source, rather than from our human finite minds.

I am small, and I am broken, and I am weary.
But I am held in the hollow of his hand.

6.

Sometimes, I come at God from the side.

You’ve been there—I’ve been there—in so many different ways. The task that is daunting. The confrontation you really don’t want to face. The memory that you cannot bear to re-live.

So you sidle up to them from the side. Ease into them. Do your best to fool yourself into believing you’re not going to do what you know you’re going to do.

So it has been countless times for me in prayer. Stripped of my strength, independence, and even basic self-worth, I cannot draw enough courage to approach God face to face. I know that I need him—that is not the question. I know that he loves me—that is not my problem. It is the simple question of *how* I will come into his presence.

To drop to my knees and bare my soul would come close to killing me—or so it feels. My soul is weighed down with pain to such an extent that were I to open it to him all at once, it would overwhelm me. Even to admit to myself, “I am going to pray now,” is to open the hurt too much.

So I walk. I wander. And as I would with a good friend, when I am ready, I talk.

I talk of the day, and the frustrations. I talk of the birdcalls I hear, and the wind, chill on my face. I talk of fears, and I talk of weeping in the night—and how much it hurt.

I talk of my doubts, and how much I love God and how much I am frightened that he will allow me to be hurt again.

And slowly, more slowly than one might think, it all comes out. Could I spend an hour on my knees pouring my heart out to God? No. Not now. Other times, other places; but not now. But I can walk and murmur my heart's thoughts for an hour.

That is where I go to meet him, and that is where I am met. He doesn't count any less the informality of the setting—he rushes to embrace his child in whatever way we can manage to reach out to him. It is there, walking, that I feel his hand slip into mine, and hear his voice on the feather-whispers of the birds, and in the call of the dying crickets.

Sometimes I do get on my knees. And the tears pour out as I come baldly face to face with my sorrow and my God. They are important times. And though they hurt, they do also heal. But the healing has come mostly through walking with him, talking as I talk, and drifting where I will.

And strangely, I remember the love as it flows from his face most clearly from the times I come at him from the side.

7.

A November chill bites my cheekbones and causes me to narrow my eyes against the piercing wind. Few trees are left with their autumn glory: most have dropped their gala robes and lift bare arms as silent sentinels to the coming winter.

I walk along the fields. Until only days ago, the dry stalks holding their bounty of hardened kernels extended endlessly as a living sea, swaying over the hills like swells on the ocean, bursting with the promise of rich harvest.

Now, the fields are silent. The stalks are shorn close to the ground and present the endlessly jagged angles of a crushed and trampled reaping. Here and there, a single cornstalk rises above the rest; battered sentries over their fallen brethren.

I sense that I am not only looking out; I am looking in.

I am that field. It was not very long ago that I would have described myself as rich: bearing within an order and a harmony as endless as those endless fields swaying with ripening corn. Full of promise and strength and hope for the future.

Now, I am jagged angles.

Broken stalks.

Trampled earth.

Barren land.

And I cry to my Father for hope, and I implore him to know if I shall ever be me again. Full again. Able to give again. Happy again. Love again.

In the place of barrenness, I have nothing to hold onto but words. The word that streams will flow in the desert. The word that the cypress will grow in the wilderness. The word that this field will be bountiful again.

Of such is faith.

I look out over the cracked land. The farmer's faith in the spring does not cause the field to put forth green shoots in this November chill. He must wait, and be still; he knows the winter will freeze the ground and split it, and burn it with frost and ice.

I place what trust I can in Another's words spoken in promise. It does not ease the pain. It does not cause me to smile. It does not lessen the time of agony, and crying, and waiting. I am jagged angles. Broken stalks. Trampled earth.

Of such is faith.

Fasting

Dramatic monologue, spoken as if by an older person turning the pages of a journal, reading excerpts from a year-long exercise in weekly fasting – from many, many years ago.

I remember this. How old was I? Here's the date – twenty-seven. *(chuckle)* A veritable kid! But I knew it all . . . I definitely knew it all!

(wryly) For one thing, I knew how to obtain complete and total victory in my life! I can hear it in those opening words, “This year, I am going to fast once a week. Every Thursday. This is my ‘New Year’s Resolution.’ I have put this off long enough, but God has impressed it on my heart and hounded me with it for months. So I am going to do it. This isn’t as slipshod as my normal resolutions . . . I’ve been reading all the Scripture passages on it. And I know one thing – it ain’t going to be easy – but I’m going to do it! I want God’s power to flow through my life. So I began today, Thursday, January 1.”

Not a bad winter, that year. I got my first really decent job with a good company. *(reading)* “February 3. Thought about fasting for three days, I want that job so much! But that would be over-doing it – or making it like a good luck charm. I’m just going to be faithful to my Thursday. Haven’t missed one yet . . . except the week I had the flu. Man, when this job came around, I jumped! Spent so long on my knees that my legs fell asleep . . . but I’m going back on them now. There’s a special kind of ‘alive-ness’ to my praying when I’m fasting. . .”

There it is – February 24. “I got it! The job of my dreams! I start in two and a half weeks. I spent the whole day praising God – I figured I’d better be as serious about my praises as I was about my prayers! We forget to say ‘thank you!’ too many times.”

(reminiscing, with sadness beginning to show) That ‘thank you’ didn’t last for long. Special entry, March 25. “Mom died today. I’m not fasting – I just can’t eat. Thought I’d journal – just for a bit. The thoughts in my head aren’t nice . . . but I’d better let God know. I hate him. Hate him for doing this to me . . . for letting this happen. Why give good things with one hand and evil with the other? I’d give up every good thing in the world to have Mom back. I’m too young to see her die.”

(turning a few pages) “July 7. Yes. I am fasting today. I don’t know why. I haven’t done it since Mom died. I don’t really care about being serious with a God who lets me hurt that much. But I’m going to do it just because I’m supposed to be obedient . . . I remember Bonhoeffer’s words – something like love carrying you through the times you don’t feel like being obedient, and obedience carrying you through the times you don’t feel like you love him. So I’ll be obedient. I sure don’t feel like I love him.”

(turning pages again) “August 13. Prayer seems dull, and worse because I’m plain old hungry. I focus more on my stomach than my heart on days like this. And I get depressed easier when I haven’t eaten. Maybe I should leave off the fasting until my soul heals a bit more.”

But I didn’t. I stuck it out through sheer stubbornness. I remember thinking that I’d show God – I almost dared him to make any changes in me. I just knew that all the fasting and praying I did – not that I could really pray much – wouldn’t make any difference at all. I didn’t love him, and I didn’t trust him. And that was the bottom line.

I couldn’t see the changes as they happened. But I can hear them. Here. On October 8. “The falling leaves danced today over the road and sidewalk as I took my usual walk. The maples were red and gold against the sky as I watched the storm roll in.”

It was such a little change. But it was simply that I was able to see beauty in the world around me; able to take little pleasures again. Felt my heart quickening, even as it pained me.

“November 2. The frost was on the grass again. I am fasting today – I know I’ve avoided using the word. Sometimes, I haven’t even had any prayers to pray. But today, I was able to read my Bible a bit. Read it and actually hear the words, as if God was saying to me, ‘Everything you give me – no matter how faltering and small – I take and treasure. Obedience when it is hard is the most victorious of all. I will heal you. Completely. I will do it.’ The verse was one that I memorized as a child – ‘My grace is sufficient for you – for power is made perfect in weakness.’”

“November 23. Thanksgiving. I had a hard time giving thanks today. I fasted yesterday, rather than today – turkey and stuffing and all. I wouldn’t say that I could give thanks much – but I could sit and be glad that God was there. Through it all. Maybe that’s giving thanks without saying words.”

“December 10. My heart is lifting with Advent and coming Christmas. Jesus fasted, too. He fasted and prayed and gave all he had in perfect love and total obedience – and he still faced the cross. Whippings and beatings and a crown of thorns and being forsaken by his Father. I think – I think that I had a very shallow definition of ‘victory,’ and really don’t understand what grace is all about. I’ve fasted a lot of the year . . . I haven’t made it every week, but I’ve tried my best. I think that without that promise that I made to fast each week, and this journal sitting on top of my Bible beside my bed . . . I don’t know if I would have made it. The discipline of doing it – whether my heart was right or not – kept me in touch with a God I wanted to turn my back on.

“I’m back in his arms now. I don’t feel particularly joyful, and I’m sad a lot, and I still have a dry taste when I read my Bible, but I am back with God now. And I think . . . I think it’s because fasting threw me a lifeline. I thought it was something that I gave to God – to let him know how serious I was about my prayers or requests or commitment. And it is that. It will always be that. And hopefully, for the rest of my life, that is what it will mostly be. But I didn’t know that

fasting is not so much our gift to God, as God's gift to us. Through it he gives grace, he saves lives – like mine Through it he builds strength to hold on when the going gets impossible. Through it he brings himself to our minds. He exposes our weakness so that he can be our strength.

“Fasting humbled me. I know now that I have nothing and am nothing. I also know, as I have fasted and prayed, and fasted and been silent, that God is everything and gives everything. He is with me in sorrow as well as in joy. He longs to hear of my hurts as well as hear my praise. Grace reaches its fullness in times of loss and weakness and pain.”

“December 31 New Year's Eve. I shall end the year as I began it – in fasting and prayer. It is approaching midnight now. I shall only write for a few minutes, because I want to be on my knees at midnight. Call it a symbolic thing. I pray that I never have another year like this one – but I expect that I will. I also know that the path God established in my life this year will keep me safe in every year to come.

“I know that in many other years, my walk with God, through fasting and prayer, will bring about great victories – of the kind I still think of as victories. Happiness, success, evangelism, ministry, family . . . I believe all those things will come in time. But I know now that I must reserve a special place for the kind of victory this year brought: for it showed me what total reliance on God meant. I wonder if God wanted to show me that first, because the other victories must build on this foundation. It was not what I expected, but it was what I needed.

“And in the end, I now know that God is faithful. Beyond all time and circumstance, God is forever faithful.”

(close the journal and leave quietly)

Musings I

1.

There was silence. And it was in that silence that I could finally hear.

Hearing is a process; never an event. It engages the mind and impacts the soul.

Physicians might say that we hear with the ear, but we do not. Those who hear only with the ear, do not hear at all. Those who strive to hear, who seek out sound, who search for meaning, who crawl on bloodied hands and knees for a whisper of that elusive quarry named in some years, Truth – they will hear.

But as hearing is not of the ear, neither is silence the absence of sound. Silence is those things which the word itself conveys: Solitude. Emptiness. Stillness. Silence is the ability to see, and the clarity to perceive. Silence is pure water on the tongue, and smooth, unfinished wood beneath the fingers. Silence is an attitude of waiting, neither restless nor passive.

That is how we hear. And hearing begins slowly.

2.

As I walked the trails, I put aside for a time the cares. The forest was rich with bird calls and green called to gold in sunlit shafts through cathedral-arching leaves. I walked, and each step released the rich smell of *humus* into the air. The lake rippled green and blue through the trees. Warmth, and damp.

A single cascade of sunlight, narrow as my fist, plunged the depths to illumine the lumpy, soft brown form of a fungoid. Dumpy. Matter-of-fact.

Puffballs like golf balls peaked from beneath dead leaves.

Orange caps with white polka-dots called to mind a caterpillar with a hooka, asking again that age old question: “Who – are – you – ?”

White fungus like coral undersea; black-streaked decomposing caps; brown, yellow, tan, red.

I love the smell of the *humus*. It is myself. Warm. Earthy. Rich and fertile. Unadorned and unashamed; the exultation of being; the freedom of being, unfettered and unique. Why, then, does *humiliation* take these things away? Make me cold. Barren. Ashamed. Fettered.

Embrace, embrace. *Humus* is rich only by absorbing death. If you turn it away – reject the realities, deny your part, your place, your pain – what will you be? What will you answer?

“Who – are – you – ?”

3.

Sunlight slants red-golden. I can feel it with my palms; tangible against my legs and on my neck. It spreads questing fingers through my hair, beating with an uneven pulse on my back.

Tiptoeing away from me, my shadow lengthens on the grass. I walk on two banks of the stream at once; one of me feels the sun, outlining my body. One of me ripples over every hillock and valley of the creekbed; walking on water and gliding with unafraid water striders.

Now and then I pass a tree, grey bark corrugated and lichen-touched. My shadow stands suddenly upright. Graceful. Elongated. A madonna formed of the one substance Michaelangelo could not carve.

When I lift my hands, I see the silhouette of priests, and I am more than ever aware of the glowing censer of the sun behind me. I see dancers, every line supple, beautiful, unhurried. I see a person who transfixes my attention, for it is I, myself, yet as I wish to be.

Mirrors often mislead; misguide by their polished quicksilver surface. When I see my hollow eyes, I fall into them. When I see the stoop of my shoulders, I cannot but feel the weight of my burden. When I see the paleness of my face, I know that I have passed into the grave.

My shadow captivates me. She is untouched by hollowness. No gauntness detracts from her beauty. She is rich and full in her very darkness and mystery. In her, the stoop of my shoulders is lifted: undefeated, and unworried.

We are joined only at the heels. Bruised heels. Tired feet.

She dances as I walk. She glides as I pace. When I pause, she is quiet: silent with a presence none other can equal. I rejoice to see her. I have stood, marveling, tracing her lines and the attitude of her hands. Memorizing her profile and exulting as the wind played with her hair and dress. Finding her beautiful. Intoxicating and playful; somber and joyful.

She is myself. And as she walks with me, I am becoming what she is.

4.

Chopping cranberries in my little hand-grinder is a winterly task. I take a mixing bowl, a bag of cranberries, and a few papertowels into the living room, sit cross-legged on the floor, and turn on a favorite movie. Candles scented with vanilla and cinnamon work the knots out of my muscles and the wrinkles from my mind.

Handful by handful, I put the fresh cranberries in the chopper, and grind away at the little crank. At first there is only a small, lumpy pile of cranberry glop in the mixing bowl, but by the time I am finished, I have some eight cups of cranberries.

Then I rise, somewhat stiff-legged, and take my largess into the kitchen.

It is my yearly ritual. At the first hint of winter in the air, I spend several evenings making dough. Not cookies. Just dough. The eight cups of cranberries are joined by an equal measure of chopped walnuts. They are for cranberry-softies, long since my favorite winter treat. I will use an entire jar of dried orange peel when I make my six or eight recipes'-worth of cookie dough.

Zip-loc bags are filled, pressed flat, and placed in the freezer. Soon they are joined by cocoa cookies with peanut butter chips, spiced applesauce drops, molasses softies, peanut butter cookies, and holiday date drops. Half of my freezer becomes packed with carefully stacked bricks of dough.

Getting in and kneading the dough is time-consuming, and rough on the hands. Cranberries stain my fingernails, and cocoa powder *poofs* in all directions. If I do a lot, my wrists will ache the next day.

But there is something I look forward to all year that is found in this simple act. It is preparing something with my own hands. It is a creation of skill as serious in my eyes as if I were a woodcarver or a sculptor. The fact that I can turn tasteless flour, slippery eggs, and too-strong spices into mouthwatering treats that fill the house with the scent of home/security/warmth/love – that is something I treasure.

Creation is reaffirming. Self-affirming. Is that what God said at the end of the sixth day?

I have done this thing.

This thing is myself.

And it is very good.

5.

I have a subscription to *International Wildlife*. Often on its pages, I will find stunning tropical birds, their plumage a kaleidescope of color, their eyes bright, as if to say, Have you ever seen any bird like me?

I used to shake my head somewhat in disappointment. I live in the northeast U.S., I would respond. There is nothing here like you. Grey and brown – that is what we have here. Very dull.

Eyes open, please. Eyes open.

Brown is the color of the sparrow, soft and mottled. Is “common” synonymous with “dull”? Have you considered her bright eye, and the fact that no matter how much concrete man pours over grass and fields and trees, she is there – a brown flurry of feathers, a perky beak, a delicate profile: always available to proclaim to a busy, unobservant, littering humanity that God is still alive? And if he cares for the sparrow, for one note of song in a lonely world, surely he cares for you?

Grey is the color of the mourning dove. Grey and muted beige, cautious in every step, taking noisy flight at the slightest provocation. She bobs her head with each movement, communicating always a gentle defenselessness. Doves were the poor man’s sacrifice, centuries past. Their coos are mournful still; have you asked why they cry?

White is the color of the woodpecker’s breast. His back is a checkerboard of black and white, his sound a pounding percussion to the woods’ silence. Rooting out rot, tearing away dead wood, consuming the invading crawling army. The incessant drilling must, I think, wound the tree. But the buffeting from without is survivable. A kind of surgery. The rot from within will kill. Every time.

Black is the color of the crow. Nothing so picturesque as a raven; nevermore. Just a somewhat skittish carrion eater, garbed in the Reaper's black garment, a reminder of mortality and a prediction of . . . that which we do not want predicted.

Red is the color of the cardinal. Though your sins be as crimson, they shall be white as snow. So he cocks his black-masked head from an ice-encrusted branch. Will you listen? he asks. And again, Will you listen?

Yellow is the color of the goldfinch. Warbler of joy, stalwart defender of his territory, dancer in the air, soulmate of flowers.

Blue is the color of the jay. Raucous with color, defiant in strife, unsurpassingly beautiful in flight. Others have sweet songs, he laughs with glee. I challenge with color – See me! See me!

Are not all the rest of these things written in the chronicles of the kings of Israel? Time will fail me if I tell of the iridescent green mallard, and his mate of the royal purple feather. If I speak of the silent wingspan of the blue heron, and the dark brown practicality of the junco. The titmouse tilts her head with the soft grey of a morning sky, and is joined by the pert package of the chickadee.

As I learn their names, calling them as did Adam – finch, bluebird, Canadian goose, nuthatch, flicker, cedar waxwing, indigo bunting – I find myself suddenly no longer alone. The wind takes wing, and the air bursts with song. I am surrounded by a flight of witnesses, none of them silent, all of them vibrant with beauty, melody, understanding, presence.

Then it is that I walk out into the field, away from the noise and away from the torment of being human. And the sparrow comes, and alights on the swaying cattail. He trills lightly:

A still, small voice, and a bright and knowing eye.

Ode to a Bugzapper

O purplish light!
O blue so bright!
May ergs forever flow
through all your glass
to excite the gas
that makes you sweetly glow.

My debt to you
grows greater through
as summer hastens on:
as bugs and gnats
breed in the flats
and fly up with the dawn.

As darkness falls
and deadly palls
of 'squitos gather round,
your light burns bright
all through the night
and I hear a welcome sound.

Crr-ack! and *zap!*
Yes, with a snap
the bugs I loathe are fried –
and still you bring
more to your sting
to join those that have died!

Woes of a Socialite

I don't have room
for all my appointments –
my calendar is full!
Each evening, night,
and morning bright
is scheduled close until
In desperation I juggle it all
to squeeze just one more in!
I make the time for every one:
for that *one more friend* to win.
By now my life is one grand party –
my house is always packed;
in fact, the guests must stand so close
you could almost call them stacked!
But still I persist
in going out
and seeking more to know:
I can't get enough
of all they say!
and so to my home
they must go.
Some people look askance at me
but I just wave them by:
How can they know
the love between
my wonderful books
and I!