



# **EARTHRISE SAMPLER**

**Personal Reflections about Spirit**

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## **Preface**

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) has a rich history that stretches back in one form or another for over forty years. During that time it has gone through many transitions. Today, affiliated national ICA organizations are playing a dynamic role of service in numerous countries around the world. On the threshold of the year 2007, the ICA in the United States is currently in the midst of a major transformation as it seeks to respond to new realities and major challenges. Change is a constant in our world and the appearance of new opportunities often occurs in unanticipated ways. The ICA remains committed to seeking them out in a global context and responding to them creatively in a local a manner.

The ICA has always seen itself as a catalyst and enabler of others. The Living Legacy is a new undertaking by the ICA to preserve wisdom from its past activities and to encourage further innovation based upon its diverse experience. The influence of this work can thereby stretch far beyond ICA's own institutional reach. In the past, this perspective was captured in the ICA's passion to build a "movement of care." Though such language may sound somewhat quaint and old fashioned today, it remains a major aim.

The Earthrise Community is an example of an unexpected initiative that has no direct link with the ICA. Yet it has obviously been influenced by a historical connection with the ICA and is consistent with many aspects of the ICA's current mission. We, therefore, are most pleased to support the preparation and distribution the Earthrise Sampler.

Carolyn Antenen  
President of the Board of Directors  
The Institute of Cultural Affairs (USA)

## **Introduction to the Earthrise Community**

The reflections collected in these pages were originally shared through an electronic mailing list named Earthrise. Earthrise, however, is more than a listserv; it is an experiment in virtual community. Its primary purpose is to enable regular rehearsals about the wonder of life, in all of its glory and pain, through brief reflections written by members which are then shared with the entire membership. Today, that consists of 120 people living in numerous countries around the world. Earthrise is guided by a simple structure and discipline so that there are no dominant voices (messages to the entire group are posted according to a designated schedule) and no passive observers (membership means a willingness to share something when one's scheduled turn arrives). Feedback and discussion occurs offline through correspondence between individuals. Messages sent to the entire group are considered, in a virtual context, to be entering sacred space.

This collection is a representative Sampler of hundreds of reflections that have been posted since 1999 when the practice was first initiated. Four or five reflections like these now typically appear in the email inboxes of members each week.

While there has been little explicitly stated within the community about what constitutes a life reflection, nearly all follow a similar pattern. They typically begin with a paragraph or two describing a recent event followed by a brief reflection about its significance. Their length is such that they rarely take more than a few minutes to read. Three dynamics are involved in their preparation: a member chooses a personal happening for consideration, reflects on its meaning, and then gleans an insight which will speak to others. This creative process constitutes a spiritual exercise. When shared, such reflections can spur others to become more aware of their own potential for living life at a deeper, more self-conscious level. Reflections posted on Earthrise thereby offer a second type of spiritual exercise for the readers. The community as a whole is nurtured in both the reading and the writing.

While many members of Earthrise have a history with the Ecumenical Institute of Chicago (EI) and offspring organizations, the Order Ecumenical (OE) and the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), there are participants in Earthrise who have no direct experience with any of the three. This is a trend that the community hopes to encourage.

Nevertheless, the legacy of the Ecumenical Institute is one that greatly inspires the Earthrise community. Religious Studies One, or RS-1 as it was most commonly known, was the core course in a curriculum that challenged the comforts of traditional religious thought. Based on brief articles by Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Richard Niebuhr,

RS-1 was an examination of the human predicament and authentic living through the reinterpretation of symbols and metaphors of religious language within a modern secular environment. This, however, is not to be confused with what has since become known as “secular humanism.” There was nothing human centric in referrals by the Ecumenical Institute to the “secular-religious.” Neither was there anything supernatural.

Faith, as existentially explored in RS-1, concerns one’s relationship to life. It has to do with lucidity, gratitude, and action as free agents while embracing the challenges of one’s human contingencies. This is far different from desperately hoping for relief, or escape, from given realities. Such imaginary longing for “the true and the beautiful” (as Bultman expressed it) is usually the stuff of self-indulgent illusion. When it becomes the focus of adulation, it also is the stuff of idolatry. The demythologized Word, as examined in RS-1, is that which proclaims “life is good, all is received, the past is approved, and the future is open.” Spiritual faith is about living such an affirmation.

The Ecumenical Institute experimented in a number of ways to rehearse this secular-religious perspective about faith. A brief morning worship service known as Daily Office included a witness from a community member who offered a short spoken reflection. These witnesses were a precursor of the reflections that are shared among Earthrise members by email today. Though it is not necessary for Earthrise members to be familiar with the Ecumenical Institute or RS-1, it is important to recognize that religious language, if and when it appears in postings, is used metaphorically. Some of the reflections make this explicitly clear while others simply imply it. Many never make direct reference to religious language at all even though they as they intend to occasion a greater degree of self-consciousness and awareness.

In addition to its reinterpretation work on Christian symbols, the Ecumenical Institute was also committed in finding ways to universalize spiritual reflection and to transcend the limits of historical religions. Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) was a fellow traveler in this regard. Though myth is commonly used to denote falsehood, Campbell spent a lifetime showing its potential for communicating underlying truth. Ultimately, all religious language is about myth through its use of symbols, stories, and poetry.

An interview with Joseph Campbell in the New York Times Magazine was entitled “**Earthrise: The Dawning of a New Spiritual Awareness**” (April 15, 1979).<sup>1</sup> Campbell spoke about the passing of one age to another, of the peril that faces our world, and of the task of proclaiming spiritual wisdom in a time of global transition.

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<sup>1</sup> *The full interview with Joseph Campbell, “Earthrise,” can be found in **Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor** by Joseph Campbell, Eugene C. Kennedy (ed), New World Library, 2001.*

During the interview, Campbell mentioned the famous photograph, which was first taken from Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve 1968, of the earth rising over the moon's horizon. That image, Campbell felt, had stirred a new perspective: The world as we know it is coming to an end and something new is emerging. "The world as the centre of the universe, the world divided from the heavens, the world bound by horizons in which God's love is reserved for members of an in-group: That is the world that is passing away. Apocalypse is not about a fiery Armageddon and salvation of a chosen few, but about the fact that our ignorance and our complacency are coming to an end."

"Our divided world view," Campbell further explained, "with no mythology adequate to coordinate our conscious and unconscious – that is what is coming to an end. The exclusivism of there being only one way in which we can be saved, the idea that there is a single religious group that is in sole possession of the truth – that is the world as we know it that must pass away, and is passing away." For Campbell, sight of earth from the moon conveyed an inclusive new myth on the rise.

Writing and sharing life reflections that spring from everyday events to reveal similar spiritual insights, are a practical contribution, however modest, to creating and rehearsing a new mythology. The underlying premise of the Earthrise community is that everyone is deeply nurtured by hearing others tell such stories and by attempting to tell them themselves. In doing so, they join Campbell and others in the adventurous journey of giving expression to the new religious in a secular age.

We hope that the reflections found in this Sampler will speak to others as well. It has been published and distributed in the hope that it will stimulate greater awareness and interest in spiritual reflection within the complex realities of today's world. Anyone who finds the Sampler to be of interest is most cordially invited to join the community in its ongoing experiment. Send a request at the address below and we will be pleased to add your name to the electronic mailing list. We will also look forward to your subsequent participation.

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Earthrise moderator  
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## **A Sampler of Personal Reflections from Earthrise**

### **KINDLING THE LIFE QUALITY, Brian Stanfield, Australia**

Some years ago, I remember someone saying to a bunch of us in India, "It only takes a feather to trigger the deeps." I've been experimenting with ways to shift people's mood at the supermarket checkout counter. I'm a shy kind of person, so I've been surprising myself lately. I have lots of opportunities to do this, since I do all the grocery shopping for our family.

I've got used to waiting for it. Uh-oh, here it comes. The man behind me says, "Why does it always take so l-o-o-o-ng?"-- referring to the check-out process. I have given up attempting to remind them of their existential situation of being in the world. Instead, I try to divert their attention. This is an old trick I learned from my wife who has used it on me on innumerable occasions when I have sunk into the abyss.

Last Friday, when the grouching happened at the Dominion store, I looked around and my eyes lit on this Halloween display a few feet away. I said, "Well, great gravy, will you get a load of that?" It was a figure of the Grim Reaper. At a signal, its eyes would flash fire. It was a fearsome sight, yet fascinating. I heard the complainers behind me: " Ooo, Alfred, look at that, isn't that something." Soon, the whole line was preoccupied with the Grim Reaper's performance. It was a small thing, but suddenly the mood shifted; the pall of complaints was gone.

One of my colleagues has the practice of going into places like licensing bureaus, or dentist lounges, and saying in a loud voice, "GOOD MORNING, HOW ARE WE ALL TODAY?" He says the effect is startling. People come out of their lethargy and introversion and recognize their innate sociality.

There are few situations that couldn't do with a turn of the dial, and a calling forth to living life fully. "It means kindling the life quality where it was not." I invite us once again to pick up that stance and find opportunities to do some kindling today.

### **I HAVE NO ENEMIES, Mary D'Souza, India**

For many years I have walked into situations defensively because of wounds that have been inflicted knowingly or unknowingly. Perhaps, when I was a babe I had an innate ability to be totally present with unrestricted positive regard in all situations. I suspect we are all born with it.

But somewhere in my journey through life it got all mucked up. So, I have lived with the perspective and ability to hold resentment and anger against people with whom I have lived and worked. It comes as a tightening



of the jaw and an ability to put on a blank expression on my face. It is almost as if an iron railing lifts itself up with strong borders to protect me from the possible pain and anguish. With this I try to communicate I remember even if you have forgotten.

I have heard the past is approved and the future is open and know it more as an intellectual reality.

The other day I was attempting to communicate Stephen Covey's *First Habit: Be Proactive* to a group of development workers. The notion came into my head that I do not need to have any enemies. Just like that... I can walk with a clean heart and fresh soul into every situation that I come into. It stayed there only as a notion. It simmered there for a blip of a second. I liked the idea.

The next day I opened up the newspaper and there was a quotation from Osho (aka Rajneesh) and the sheath fell off. The article read Hate does not exist in present. It can only exist if you remember the past. It can exist if you think that this man is going to do something tomorrow. But if you do not have any reference to the past or the future then how can you hate? I then remembered *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle. I read his books and listened to his tapes last year. I found myself saying it does make sense. From this thought then arose another insight that every deed then is pure service.

As I look out of my window I see a plant extending its growth in a very unusual way. The growth is new and very different from the rest of the plant. While the rest of the plant is stretching itself out gracefully in different directions this new shoot (which is about 8 long) is straight and audacious, like arms outstretched coming from the very tip of one of the small branches. I guess this is an invitation to stay with this new consciousness and relate with unrestrained positive regard to all the possible situations and people in my life.

#### **A RANGE OF FRIENDS**, Mary Laura Jones, Chicago

When my sons moved out, I got the cat. She is 16 years old and extremely opinionated. She doesn't get around like she used to anymore. She is getting old and kind of crabby. She is not quite as cute as she used to be. She demands attention whenever someone comes into the room. And she focuses a lot on eating. Someone bought her some catnip and she flew around the room for awhile and then lay down and slept the sleep of the dead. She has caused me to think about what kind of an older person I intend to be. I have an eighty year old friend who advises, "Be sure you cultivate at least one friend from each decade. They will keep you aware of what is really going on with all the generations and you will gain wisdom from each of them that may help you age graciously, if you have sense enough to pay attention. A range of friends will also help you keep in touch with what is going on". So, I have been making my list of friends

from each decade and keeping in touch with them. The younger ones are worried, about terrorism, the Presidency, job opportunities, marriage and their future. The middle aged ones are worried about money and jobs and their kids and the state of the world. The older ones are concerned about having enough money to retire someday but many of them are thinking about what they want to do with the next twenty to thirty years of their lives. And that gives me hope.

**DOING**, Mark Philips, Seattle

Three years ago I was laid off from the Boeing company and had the great opportunity to restructure the Doing part of my life. The idea that Sarah and I worked out was to find any reasonable part time job to help pay the bills, and use the rest of the time to expand my involvement in several good works, including serving on our towns Environmental Quality Commission, leading a stream monitoring and restoration group, and leading an adult education program at our church. These are activities I believe are important and enjoy doing, so I anticipated a period of great personal growth as I devoted more time to them.

So far the plan has worked all right. The environmental work connects me with an amazing group of dedicated people and a mission with a certain primacy at this point in history. The church dimension is tougher. I am quite fond of the people in my congregation, but it's very clear that none of them, or our priest, ever took RS-I. As with many churches today, they embrace just about anyone who is willing to take on assignments, so they cut me quite a bit of slack to do study sessions, some of which must seem absolutely heretical.

The surprise for me has been the part time job, which has turned out to be the portal through which much of the growth in my life is happening. Its with the Center for Manufacturing Excellence based at one of the community colleges in the area. Our mission is to promote manufacturing in the State of Washington, and especially to work with manufacturers and two-year colleges to develop training programs that bring young people into the field. Here are a couple of things I have learned about myself and the world through this work:

- 1) Manufacturing today is a lot different than the images I have locked in my brain. Successful shops are clean, orderly, and are constantly scrambling to update and innovate. Many fabrication processes are computer controlled, and there is a great concern with quality.

- 2) Many of the people who work in these places are highly skilled and thoughtful. They care about their businesses and define success as more than making money. I hate to admit how many times my subtle prejudices about these folks have been exposed and shattered as I actually got to know and work with them on one project or another. Far from putting in their time, many genuinely love their work, offer ideas for improvement, and are

fascinated by the act of creating tangible things that have value. Many have a confident attitude about their positions and the options open to them, within manufacturing and beyond.

3) A sense of direction in life is a great thing. This may seem self-evident, but it is something I have learned anew. By and large the Center works with the 40% of young people who aren't going to go to 4-year colleges, at least not for a while. Many of them have a fatalistic outlook toward the future, and are desperate for some meaningful role and place. Since the predominant view of manufacturing is negative, it doesn't tend to be a field that they are counseled to get into. And yet I have seen young people start out apprehensively in a manufacturing training program, become enthusiastic as their skills and confidence grew, and land jobs they are glad to have. I have spoken with young people working in manufacturing jobs who are planning for the future and can't imagine being somewhere else. Obviously this insight has broader application: finding one's niche in the working world, even in an unlikely setting, feeling prepared, and having the sense of a future that is open (if not crystal clear), can be key elements in building a life.

#### **ON HEALING**, Marilie Blanchard, New Mexico

Over the past three years, I've had much time and opportunity to focus on healing, physically and spiritually. The barrage of concerns shared from many of you on health, strokes, deaths of children, heart problems, deaths of parents and the combined grief and celebration exhibited through all of it have encouraged this reflection.

My late husband, David, lived his whole life physically challenged having been told he had a neuro-muscular condition that would either kill him or put him in a wheelchair by the age of 60. It prevented him from activities such as running or jumping or moving quickly. However, David's limitations were never that which defined him or set the limitations on his life. When he slipped on snow in the late 70's, broke his leg, then developed a clot which laid him low for a period of time, the pastor came to call. The pastor was experimenting with the laying on of hands for healing. "May I pray with you and lay hands upon you that you might heal?" he asked David. David stated that praying was fine but he did not believe that the pastor had that healing power. "Don't you want to be healed? the pastor again inquired. "I am healed" was David's response.

As witness to this exchange, I have been caught up short since 2002 as I have been through breast cancer, four surgeries, chemotherapy, nine months of baldness (wigs are a lot less work and cost than real hair anyway!), long term arthritic reactions to chemo, then this past year double knee replacement. My, it takes time to recover and heal! It is also hard work, full time consistent work, and very private and personal. The most

difficult task is to continue to be engaged in the world and things that matter beyond your own health so your illness does not define you!

We all have the friends for whom everything in life is a disaster. They regale you with stories of their health crises and perceived crises; their children who are in trouble; their cats and dogs that cause them daily headaches; their jobs that they wish they could leave and more. How do they find healing?

The church called and asked if they might assign someone to be a "caregiver" for me during my illness. I said yes only if they could find someone who would empower me not pity me. I needed someone who would "kick my rear" and not cook my meals, who would challenge me to continue working, not feel sorry for me; a friend with whom I could laugh and cry.

Living with the image of "I am healed" whatever happens sustained me. During the most difficult time, I used Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler's Life Lessons as my daily meditations, one chapter a day. The day of the biggest surgery the meditation was on "Loss". They talk about loss as that which "unifies us" and "helps us deepen our understanding of one another." People fall, and they pick themselves up and continue. The work involved in loss, in grieving leads to understanding ourselves though changed, as whole. Each loss brings to us a new being, a new wholeness. "I am healed" by the love that transcends us all.

#### **MEMORIES, Doris Hahn, Indiana**

Just after sunup one morning this week, I was lying on the floor as I finished a series of exercises. I was catching my breath before heading back to change clothes when I heard some geese calling nearby.

I had immediate images of the family of geese we watched from our apartment across town last spring. A quick series of reflections followed: Could this be the same family? There had only been a few honks; so it was likely a small gaggle. Maybe they had discovered the pond in the middle of our condo complex and were headed there. What fun it would be to watch another family grow up the goslings changing from tiny birds to adult size, while the parents lead them around, teach them swimming safety, keep them in line as they waddle around the edge of the pond, watch over them while they sleep.

In the midst of my rapid ruminations, I realized I was trading off my experience with geese-watching last spring. Charles had gone to his bird book and learned several things about Canada Geese. The most amazing discovery was that both parents lose their flying feathers during the time the fledglings are maturing. Thus, the grownups are earth-bound. Both of them engage fully in parenting as they teach new skills. One stayed at the front of the line, the other at the rear, as they swam across the pond, or walked

along the bank or crossed the street. And alternately the parents stood watch while the rest of the family slept, their heads tucked under their wings.

Then a secondary bunch of reflections took over as I thought about the fact of my memories of geese. I went back to something my mother said late in her life, as she talked about conversations with a friend she had traveled with on several occasions. Her comment was something like, When you get to be my age, memories are about all you have left. I don't count myself as being at that point in my life, but the comment has stayed with me (as a memory).

Thus began several reflections on memories themselves. What I know is that memories can be accurate, distorted or wrong. They can provoke moments of pain, delight, anger, wonder, joy, awe, sadness, or hope. They can become an occasion for self-pity or for the challenge of new endeavors. Memories are not simply ephemeral glimpses at the past, but a huge part of the stuff of the present, to which we must always take a new relationship and by which we choose to live now and toward the future, in unfaith or faith. Hmmm, just like life. And memories seem to become increasingly important for the oldest among us.

My exercises were over for that morning, and I headed toward the shower.

#### **YES AND NO, Diann McCabe, Texas**

I woke up this morning to rain. These days in Central Texas, rain is a precious reminder of the presence of hope. The drought that has a hold on us shows up in dried up tanks (ponds), normally hearty native plants hardly making it through the almost non-existent winter, and in dangerously low water levels in our aquifer, the underground system that sustains all of life in this sensitive but economically booming area of Texas. The rain this morning came as a big surprise to me, announced after a big clap of thunder. Surprising because we had already had nearly two inches earlier this week. The earlier rain is already showing its residue in new leaves, fresh green on old green on the bushes confident to flower now.

Yesterday I took my 83 year-old mother to the doctor. She walks with a walker and wears knit shoes that fall off of her feet, swollen from arthritis and God-knows-what. We were to receive the report approving her for major surgery. (to repair a broken neck!) After we left the office, I drove her to the Dairy Queen for an ice cream. She doesn't get out except to the doctor these days and I thought I would draw out our return home to her living room. I steered the car toward the place out in the country where she and my dad lived for 30 years until they moved into town.

This place out in the country is where my father was born and where I was born. Mama gave birth to my brothers and sister and me there in the same room where my father was born, in a house built in the 1890s and torn down in the 80s.

(My mother is a very simple woman. She has never possessed a driver's license and--this breaks my heart--she has never gone swimming. ["I was not made for the water"] But she has a way of being grateful for all of life. She doesn't like silence--the radio always plays horrible country music or hymns--and if there is a lull in the conversation, she says, "Yeaahhh" [for yes] or "So," or "Now." My sons notice this. My dad, on the other hand, says, "Nooo," when there is silence.)

When we drove up the road out in the country yesterday to the place where the old house used to stand, my mother gasped, astounded to see how green the fields were. She practically sang out, "Oh, oh, oh, it's beautiful! Look what the good Lord has sent us." And when I looked out, I saw new baby calves, new budding trees, and a tank filled a quarter full. My father walked up to us (he's 85 and was carrying a shotgun--to shoot the camérons eating his catfish and perch out of the tank). My mother asked him why he had not told her how green and beautiful everything looked. (He goes out in the country twice a day.)

He said, "Well, you know it rained; of course it's going to be green."

But my mother needed things said to her, about beauty and change and newness. My father didn't notice or feel the need to say in words these things about the greening of the land he was born on, either because he sees it every day or for some other reason.

In that moment I felt inside of me, the dueling of the two sides of those who had given me life--the side that always says yes and the side that always says no.

And I realize how strong the force of both yes and no are, how the two forces are always clambering for their own voice within me. And I also know which voice gives life, gives voice to the Word that sees possibility and incredible beauty all around us.

My mother's surgery is Friday. It will take three hours to wire her neck together. She says she's ready. Meanwhile, she will sit in her chair by the window back in her living room in town, waiting, and looking for the white-wing doves that come to eat from her feeder--if my dad will keep it filled.

May we all give thanks for the lives we have been given.

#### **THE BUTTERFLY**, Alan Berresford, England

I know that butterflies are often cited as the harbingers of the mystery, but it happened to me, so here's one more butterfly witness!

I was attending an international conference on Children in Need in Dartington in SW Britain. We had just finished a plenary session, and my colleague Malcolm and I were on our way out of the large and beautiful Tudor stone hall. As we talked, we suddenly spotted a small peacock butterfly flapping its wings animatedly on the flagstones before us. My first

thought was that the insect must be in its death throes at the end of summer, since the conference was in September.

But as I bent down I noticed that the butterfly had one tiny leg caught in a piece of blue-tak stuck on the floor. It was quite delicate job requiring patience and care to release the creature's leg, but eventually I managed it without having to amputate. The butterfly fluttered clear and free up to the large hall window.

We weren't oblivious to the fact that the butterfly's days were still numbered, but just for a minute we had been privileged to witness the intersection of two realms normally quite separate, the butterfly's world and ours. And this took place in the silent gaze of the stone hall which would outlast not only the butterfly but also our own two ephemeral lives. Mystery, care, consciousness and tranquility flooded through the moment. And I was grateful.

### **THE SHARK**, Dharmalingam Vinasithamby, Malaysia

Last night, I went to buy fish in Tampoi, Johore Baru. The market, which opens at midnight, sells goods at wholesale rates and is frequented by thrifty shoppers. It was a good night--the crowd of buyers was not so large and fish was plentiful.

After getting most of my fish, I spotted some shark. They were little babies no more than 10 inches long. I found myself getting angry with the fisherman who had chosen to catch them instead of being responsible and going after bigger fish.

The thought came to me--what was I getting angry about? The waste of the lives of those baby fish, caught before they could grow up and maybe sire some fish of their own? Or was it anger that the resources of the ocean that we enjoyed were being wasted? Was my anger for the sake of the fish or for me?

Then I saw some bigger shark--almost 2.5 feet long, and bought one of them. A long tapered tail, solid beneath the hand and rigid, and a body shaped like a rocket. The skin was hard and smooth and well padded. It fitted well into the box on the back of my motorcycle.

Cleaning the fish and putting it away in the fridge takes me about 40 minutes. I'm the only one awake in the house at that hour--about 2 am--the work affords me time and substance for thinking.

Washing the fish and packing them away, I find myself absorbed in regarding the shape of their bodies, sometimes translucent, revealing what's inside.

The shark had to be cut in half to fit the fridge. The knife went through the midsection easily - I had expected more resistance. The flesh was clean and white, except for the mass of innards in the middle.

I yanked the two cut sections apart and the entrails snapped clean away from the lower section. I washed the lower section, clean and bloodless, wrapped it and put it away.

I reached into the upper section to pull away the innards, all soft, bloody and slippery beneath my hands. It was difficult. Bits broke off and fell into the sink.

Then among the gore in my hands, I noticed six round golden spheres; eggs! More came out as I pulled. So it was a female fish, I thought.

Then it hit me--the brutality of my action--ripping apart the guts of this being--and putting it away for my stomach. I offered a small prayer that my action might be forgiven; that God who puts all beings in the planet and lets them feed on one another might excuse my terrible act.

But then I thought--God too is the author of this act. If my action was terrible and fear filling, it was nothing compared to His deeds.

It sank into me, as it has many times before, that life is there to be sacrificed; life is sacrificed; and this is the value placed on my life as well.

Just as God accepts and even approves the breaking up of that 2.5-foot shark and the spilling of its guts and eggs, so too he accepts and even approves the rending that goes on in my own life.

And I am free of the demand to seek compensation for the injustices and hurt that I have experienced and continue to experience.

**THANKS**, Mary Hampton, Texas

There is an Irish folk song where the widow of a fisherman who has drowned "has gone down to condemn the wild ocean for the murderous death of her man." I recently found myself thinking about the double tragedy conveyed in the song--that of the drowning as well as trying to personalize and condemn the ocean as capable of murder.

Then Friday night I was driving to the federal prison for a regular Quaker meeting we conduct twice a month. There were two of us in my car, myself and Genevieve who is over 65.

We had a flat tire. I knew I could call AAA and sometime in the next hour or so they would have someone change the tire. I also knew we would miss the Meeting.

I decided to change the tire. With Genevieve reading the owner's manual we worked out the mechanics of the job (I last changed a tire in driver's ed at 14). It went fairly smoothly but I did find myself cursing the tire tool, specifically the jack crank as well as working up quite a sweat.

We proceeded to the prison and were reprimanded for being late by the nicer chaplain, a Catholic nun who promptly became sympatric when told the tire story.

I found myself thinking during worship of the story about Black Orpheus saying "thank you." And yes, being who I am and embracing the



life I have includes saying thank you for my irritation at the inanimate, rather than waiting to be a better person who doesn't feel irritation.

What a gift to be received "in spite of my brokenness" not when it can be removed from my character. To affirm my life, including the cursing the jack, instead of waiting for a life where I don't respond that way.

**ABUNDANCE**, Margaret Aiseayew, Iowa

This week was explosive. My garden produced cucumbers, zucchini, yellow squash, potatoes and the first cherry tomatoes. I was overwhelmed and since I can't share the fruits, I share the reflections.

I am not sure there is anything in this world to be learned that cannot be known through growing a garden. That work is required to do a life is a given, so you prepare the soil and plant the seeds. Then, as a first thing, is the dynamic of trust. You must trust the soil to render up its nutrients. You must trust the weather that it will not dish out more than the plants can bear, and that it will meet out enough of what they really need. Then there is the issue of patience. You must wait. But you also learn that patience is not idle. Unseeded growth must not be allowed to consume what you wish for your plants.

A garden is like going to church daily. The plants growing tall raise praises to the heavens. Evil is manifest in the garden when you are deterred from participation. That which distracts you may be a change of focus or it may simply be evil made manifest and attacking your intention. Mosquitoes so insidious as to blight your body and mind can make you feel akin to Job.

Unseeded growth seems related to unintended consequences. I am saddened to realize that seeds sewn through the ages, by the wind and water will come up to overtake your intentions if there is no care or a loss of focus. It makes the news nearly every day.

Sorrow is known in the loss of a whole crop. Obviously the rabbits needed the tender shoots of the beans more that I needed the beans. Joy is known in abundance. Timing is everything to both the comedian and the garden.

Forget your drivenness toward perfection. It just won't happen. You are not that much in control. Planting these seeds didn't make you god. You have dirt under your fingernails (those that aren't broken to the quick) that wont come out until you are dead.

Responsibility is sometimes overwhelming in the garden. Deciding which shoots to thin and which to leave. Not deciding condemns to marginality.

Against your own sense of will you must be obedient to the rain, sun, wind and soil. Freedom is exhilarating as you watch fruit flourish.

Pride, covetousness, lust, anger, sloth, envy and gluttony are all present in the garden, both within the gardener and among the plants.

When you dig the potatoes and deposit newborn rabbits to your bucket, your heart breaks. Guilt is there in many forms. You should have known a nest might be there. They did eat all the beans. Why were you in such a hurry? Will your touch result in a mother's permanent rejection?

Grace is abundant. Sometimes it happens. Sometimes it doesn't.

That work should make more than a living, it makes life, is obvious. Love is a garden. It must see all things, bear all things, believe all things and hope all things. The kindness love requires may, most of all, be to you, the gardener. It is a way to understand all things.

#### **WORDS OF WISDOM, John Cock, North Carolina**

One evening last week we were coming out of a friend's house and a tree limb blind-sided me and brought blood and has left a nice scab on my forehead. The next day I took my grandson's virus and has it been a whopper--joints, pounding head, and swollen throat. The next day I kicked a walnut chair and went to the emergency room this morning because my little toe on my right foot had turned a nice blue and was pointing into the future. I sat in the city hospital from 5:45 a.m. (Lynda sent me right down after she looked at my toe and said, "My God!") till 8:30, wet with fever, aching, disgusted with the bureaucratic mess, and sitting waiting on the doctor for almost an hour.

Lynda called it: "My God."

I'm afraid to move or interact.

On the way out of the emergency room and walking up the steps to the parking lot I guess I was the presence of very-broken-downness, hobbling with my new toeless shoe thing with straps, carrying one shoe and sock, a patch, mussed up hair, unshaven, sweating, a nice scab on my forehead, and muttering.

An old black man was coming down the steps, stopped, and said, "You know, suh, they can kill the body but not the spirit, unless you let 'um. Bless ya'."

I said "Amen" to the old black man, stopped muttering, got in the car, drove home with that word ringing loud. Then Luther spoke: "the body they may kill; God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever." "One little word shall fell" the Prince of Darkness.

The old black man said that "little word" spot on for me.

We beat up on the Prince of Darkness today.

#### **PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE, Sandy Conant Strachan, Costa Rica**

Here is a line I came across recently in a poem: "There is a fine line between playing God and taking responsibility for my behavior." It struck a chord for many reasons.

One of my many pet theories is that there are 3 kinds of people: those who live more in the past, those who live more in the future, and those lucky few who live mostly in the present. I have always been one of the second group--dreaming about life as it will be rather than as it was, sometimes neglecting what is. However, as I get older, I seem to find myself in a lot of conversations about the past. Since my memory is like a chunk of Swiss cheese, I'm a poor participant; nevertheless, each dialogue is an opportunity to re-think what happened, what decisions were made, what options were available that might have led to other outcomes. What strikes me again and again is how grateful I am that I did not have the perspective of time and experience. In other words, I think it's okay that I could NOT do a Monday quarterback job on my decisions and make them differently.

Each of the truly important ones has played its unique part in creating a rather wonderful life.

To try to "play God" (which of course I did/do), to think that I could with certainty predict and know the outcome and meaning of my actions, would have probably caused me to have skipped a number of significant things (like hey! getting married, having a child, going to Africa, just to name a few...). Where would I be now if I had not done those things? Where would I be now if, with additional experience and information, I chose to think of these decisions as "mistakes"? I prefer not to know. I like to believe that the Creator is a helluva lot more creative than I am and thus, that if there's a "plan", it contains an enormous amount of flex--that flex being my profound freedom to define and redefine my journey. Every day, I am creating a memory.

For every tomorrow that comes, today will be the "past". A daunting thought on one hand; on the other, it's like Christmas--a new beginning, a new word, a new story.

I read a quote the other day that I liked: "Not even God can change the past." It was written 450 years B.C. Sort of puts the struggle in perspective, doesn't it?

### **CHRISTMAS, Jim Troxel, Chicago**

"We have allowed our pains to embitter us" -- from the Prayer of Confession in The Daily Office of The Ecumenical Institute.

I am pleased to report that after 32 years of marriage the arguments between my wife, Karen, and me have become less frequent. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on you point of view), they still occur.

Our most recent disagreement--I think (I'm never too sure about these things)--was over my "snapping" during a meeting of the partners of our business, of which Karen and I are two of its six. I got carried away over something or another during our year-end planning retreat. I knew she felt I was off base when her cold shoulder and glowered look penetrated my noble naiveté-ness. When we got around to discussing the matter our

disagreement came down to my being right versus my being “smart”. “Smart” meaning strategic or appropriate or (maybe even) responsible. In other words, being right doesn’t make it right. Sometimes--and I think Karen thinks in my case, more often than not--keeping your mouth shut is the smart thing to do, especially if, in fact, one is being led more by emotion than logic. Which, in my case, I admit, was probably true.

I had allowed--I can see in hindsight with her help--my anger and frustration with the group to override my role as a leader to facilitate good group process. Of course, “storming” is a natural stage in group development. But, in this case, I let it get the best of me. I had allowed my pain to embitter me. I had forgotten the wonder of how well our little band had done in the first place. I had let my idealism for what I thought we should be get in the way of appreciating what we had become. I can tell you categorically that building a company to last is a lot harder than simply getting one started. My “snapping” was my dream of a struggle-less group process getting punctured. I wore my frustration on my sleeve and took it out on my colleagues.

How often does this happen to each of us? We let the emotion of the moment take precedence over our ability to see the long haul. We allow an insignificant and small irritation block our ability to see the big picture. We let the “No’s” so pervade our lives, we refuse to see the “Yes in the No.” We allow our illusion of the suffering-less life blind us from embracing the joy of life as it already is. We refuse to see the greatness and value of others with whom we disagree.

If this sounds a little soupy or sentimental and think I’ve watched “A Wonderful Life” one hundred times too many, well, then, so be it.

But hopefully if you find yourself incapable of affirming your embitterment toward life in general and some small piece of it in particular, you’ll be lucky enough to have a Karen or a Clarence or some other Angel--as the Wrath of God--remind you how lucky you are just be able and to have the privilege of having your experiences in the first place. Nothing may be changed, but everything may be transformed.

Merry Christmas and may the Word become flesh and dwell among you (for a change)!

**DARKNESS**, Bill Bailey, North Carolina

Sorry this is long but sometimes it takes a lot of words to tell about a journey to the center and back.

During the first week of August Marianna and I joined our children (Tom, Lynn, and Nan) their spouses (Cathy, Allen and Barbara) and out grandchildren, (Keara, Brenna, Billy, and Julie) for a family get-together in Ely, Minnesota. We had a great time swimming, fishing, boating, hiking, eating, buying stuff, visiting wildlife, and being with each other. I don t

have the vocabulary, space or time to tell you what a great family we have and how much we both enjoy each one of them.

During the week we had the occasion to visit an old abandoned iron mine that has been transformed into a state park for visitors. At the mine we boarded an elevator and descended to level # 27, a mile or so below the earth's surface. The mine was opened in the late 1800s and closed in 1962 when new technologies rendered it obsolete.

After reaching level #27 we boarded a small mining train that took us to a large cavern where mining had once taken place. Like any museum the cavern was set up to show how mining iron ore was accomplished until the time of closing.

Before we set out to visit each of the mining operations on display, our guide told us the history of this particular mine. In the beginning the miners were contract workers, they had to furnish their own equipment such as candles, meals, mules and tools. The only light they had to work was candlelight. To illustrate this, our guide turned off the electricity and let us experience total, and I do mean total darkness. Then he lit a candle put it on his miner's helmet, and said, Follow me. No one moved till the electricity was turned on. To make a long story short, suffice to say after the electricity was on we visited the rest of the cavern, heard the rest of the story, and learned what it was like to mine iron ore from 1888 to 1962. After that we boarded the train and returned to the elevator for our trip back to the Earth's surface.

As we waited for our elevator it became obvious that something was going on in a cavern behind the elevator. The Guide told us the University of Minnesota, in conjunction with the University of Chicago was building a proton catcher. It seems that sometime in the near future the U of C is going to shoot protons and The U of M is going to catch them so that can experiment with protons changing from particles to waves and back again (if my science vocabulary is wrong you know what I mean).

As we began our trip back to the Earth's surface it occurred to me that for past hour I had been experiences a microcosm of my life. How many times have I been in the dark without even a candle to light the way? How many times have I stumbled when the only light was a candle? Like those miners, how many times have I participated in designing and doing creative solution to life's challenges as they occur? How many times have I addressed this or that social or personal injustice sometimes in a helpful way while others seemed a failure? How many times have I marveled at what our scientist are learning and doing as we move into the future and asking myself what is it that I will never live to see ? How many lost opportunities have I had to share my love for the family? How many more will I have? Will I take advantage of the next opportunity or will I loose it again? This was the way my trip was back to the top.

It was good to see the sunlight again, to see Marianna, the kids and grandkids. I knew all over again how much I loved my family. As we

walked back to our cars, I said to my self those miners experienced all of life, and, like the miners, we, too, experience all of life, and when anyone of us takes our next breath we move with a remarkable piece of wisdom about living that make the whole journey worth while. All is Good, accepted, approved, and open. That was true before I was born, it will also be true when I turn 70 next week.

### **COLUMBUS DAY**, Catherine Welch, Denver

A few days before Columbus Day my daughter Michaela called from Fort Collins. Some students at the university were recruiting people to participate in an alternative observance of Columbus Day. For years Native American groups in Denver have protested the celebration of Columbus as a hero, given his treatment of "the locals" upon arrival in the New World. The alternate event would be a march from four different directions to celebrate the coming together of the many cultures that make up this nation.

I was secretly unenthusiastic when Michaela called. The event sounded great, but it was to be on Friday evening, and I was really looking forward to kicking back after a hectic week. I figured I would be more into watching a video than going to a demonstration. Nevertheless, it was a chance for some quality time with my daughter, so I (reluctantly) said, "Yes, I'd love to go."

When Michaela arrived late Friday afternoon, we donned red shirts, because those marching from the north were to wear red. We headed out to the gathering point for our direction. When we arrived, there was a substantial group already assembled. It was a wonderfully diverse crowd. All ages, all colors, all in red shirts. We gathered around for a ceremony in which a Native American elder offered prayers and blessed us with sage smoke. Opalanga Pugh, an African American storyteller, led us in some call-and-response affirmations of our universal brother and sisterhood. Brother Jeff, the Muslim leader of a well-respected youth center, also offered benedictions. Then we set off on the march, a two-mile walk along the Platt River to Confluence Park, where we would meet up with the groups marching in from the other directions.

It was a beautiful evening, warm and clear. It was delightful to be walking along the river with this amiable cross-section of humanity, about 200 strong. And fun to be trudging along with Michaela and several of her young friends who played a part in promoting this beautiful alternative to the traditional Columbus Day parade.

When we arrived at Confluence Park it was deeply dusk. Bond fires and huge flags of green, red, yellow and black marked the center point where the four groups would converge. Soon we could see East (all in green), West (in yellow) and South (in black) entering from their respective directions. Many marchers carried candles or lanterns. Next came speeches, dances, and music. Old war horses like Russell Means of the American

Indian Movement addressed the group, as well as a young man in a wheelchair who was injured in the Columbine tragedy. Each spoke of a society that celebrates all cultures, a world in which the gifts of every individual is respected.

Does anyone remember that in the early EI/ICA days we talked of a great 40-year social revolution to be completed in 2007? I don't believe we will see the transformed world we envisioned by that date. However, I am encouraged that there are still people on the march-young and old, who carry forward a vision of transformation. I'm a lucky person to have resisted that Friday night video, and instead been witness to a glorious piece of imaginal education that transformed Columbus Day.

#### **PREPARING TAXES, Laura Grover, Texas**

Of the many things I am engaged in, one of them is the preparation of income tax returns for individuals, businesses, trusts, etc. Right now we are in the midst of what we call tax season the time when our clients come to be interviewed and leave their paperwork for processing. There is a joke in our ranks about how one should never ask a client how their year has been, for indeed, then they would get an ear full for the next hour or two.

That has not been my experience. For the past twenty-seven years I have gradually come to realize that this is a special time for each of my clients, and a phenomenal time for me. Each tax appointment has two dimensions, the overt issues of tax compliance and money; and then another very human dynamic of personal interaction between my client and myself. To use the traditional words, it is their time for confession and my time for pronouncement of absolution.

Their confessions take many shapes and patterns. Much of the time it is about money, but if there is something heavy on their hearts they will share it with me for we have become friends and there is a bond of trust between us that is unbelievably strong. And indeed I welcome them to the table. With body language and words and smiles, sometimes chocolate and always fresh flowers and music, I encourage them to commune with me. The pronouncement of the truth about their lives is often subtle, for there is still the umbrella of tax matters that I am addressing at the same time. Invariably there is a spot in the conversation where I can affirm who they are. At the end of their appointed time, I literally say grace over the past year, encourage them to go on to glory and send them forth into the world.

To the unknowing, one would think that we discussed mundane money matters, child tax credits, estimated tax deposits, annuity taxation and the like. A passerby would see me touch a sleeve or pat a shoulder and say an encouraging word.

The Lord and I have an agreement as long as He will give me an ear to listen and as long as He will give me the words to speak and as long as He wills it, I will feed his sheep. I will see that they file a complete and

accurate return. I will advise them true about their money. I will advise them faithfully toward a meaningful retirement. I will encourage them to contribute their time, talent and resources to those less fortunate. And above all, I will love them as they are.

I am a very good tax preparer, financial planner, business advisor, money manager, etc. This stuff is second nature to me. I can do it with my hands tied behind my back. The real work I do is with those souls the Lord sends me. They come hurt and bleeding. They show up broken and in despair. I cry with them and laugh with them. I seek to convey peace and reconciliation, acceptance, joy, assurance and forgiveness. I hold them accountable for their actions in the year just past. Maybe they overspent their budget or cashed in an IRA or bought another house/car/widget. Maybe they sent a child to college or lost a parent or spouse. Their triumphs and troubles are received and their life is pronounced good. Most are unconscious of what has happened. A few know the sacred nature of our time together. It matters not. All are part of the dance.

By April 15th, I am totally exhausted. I will have subsisted on three or four nights rest daily for weeks, consumed less than the healthiest food , drank too many sodas, worn dirty clothes, answered no less than one million questions, received and responded to 5 thousand emails, sent a forest of paper through my printer, snapped at my husband, growled at my children, and ignored my Mother. I will have given literally all I have and all that I am.

On April 16th, I will rise up early (not being able to sleep since I will have forgotten how) and eagerly go to the office. Ostensibly we are closed for business but inside the office we are busy as bees. Today we evaluate!! Today we hold up our successes and give thanks for the completion of another year. We reflect on the Season. We adopt the best practices and discard those that did not work well. Most of all, we begin to plan for next year in a very conscious, methodical manner. We invent new and better ways to serve each and every client. Always with all that we have and all that we are. Till death do us part. Amen

**CAFFEINE**, Tom Bergdall, New York City

I thought I would share how I'm doing now in my sixth week, fourth day, and 6th hour of giving up drinking for Lent. But who's counting?

In truth, I've done this before, for at least the last six or seven years, despite my upbringing in an Oklahoma Methodist family where neither Lent nor drinking were recognized as something high on our list of meaningful practice.

I was inspired to try this by a very secular and generally fallen Jewish friend who a few years ago informed me that HE had decided, for the first time in his life, to start keeping kosher. As he explained, it was simply a way of reminding himself, every day, of what he had decided was important



in life. I was also impressed by my secretary's observance of Ramadan each Fall, when SHE gave up not only eating but also drinking (indicating her generally liberal interpretation of Islam) and her simple statement that it was important to "stay connected."

Having become a lapsed Christian for several years (at least with regard to spiritual practices), I thought I'd try to kindle a similar experience in the observance of Lent. Being one with a taste for good wine and good times, taking "the pledge" seemed a logical reminder of life's limits.

Suffice it to say that it "worked." After getting my ashes from the Trinity Church, I steadfastly "sobered up" in more ways than the obvious and followed the recommended practice of reading the Episcopalian's short prayer which I duly posted on my refrigerator door. My reflections on "cruciformity"--i.e. exactly for what in reality was I giving my life--became structured and constructive. The experience was like a daily shot of spiritual caffeine. I suppose this was no surprise, but was something that I had missed for many years.

What came as unexpected, however, was the manner in which the exercise was reinforced by my encounters with my entirely secular, pagan friends and colleagues on the job (which is, of course, almost all of them).

When, like me, you go out with friends a lot, usually drink a bit, and then stop, it's not something that goes unnoticed. Most people accept my explanation of why I'm sipping club soda while passing up the wine with an enigmatic "ohhhh." Others who know me better are more direct: "Let me get this straight," they say. "YOU have given up WHAT for WHICH?" It's led to some very interesting conversations about the understanding of religion in secular life which I frankly had missed for years.

The bottom line, I think, is that I was looking for a way to stay spiritually awake, and have come to realize that one needs both a discipline and a community to do it. Something as simple as Lent was, for me, a good start.

And, of course, I now really look forward to Easter.

### **COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS, BUDDY!** - George Holcombe, Texas

Ever since the last holiday, my inbox has been stuffed with email telling me to count my blessings. Sometimes even telling me which ones to count and how to do it. Most were repeats copied from some pass-on email. For years now evangelicals have been responding to my greeting, how are you? with I'm blessed. Whatever they meant by that I never really was sure. Sometimes it sounded rather cheerful, at other times it seemed more like some kind of challenge, like I'm blessed but you're not. The few I ever asked what they meant either went off on a patriotic advertisement about their religion and its importance in their life, or a kind of blub, blub, I just like to say that. Never was clear what the blessing was. I've been reminded of that old popular song that Perry Como used to sing, but I don't remember

many of the words. Some of the emails suggested that something was wrong with you if you did not count your blessings on a regular basis. When I asked some of those who sent the emails what they meant, they told me It was good for some people to do this, but I had a peculiar understanding about life and it probably wouldn't work for me.

That set me to thinking about what is this blessing thing to begin with. When I checked the scriptures, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, all I had on hand, it appeared that blessings were something sought as special. The deathbed blessing of your father was an interesting theme in the Jewish and Islamic scriptures, especially the role it played in some of the early figures. Mothers blessing didn't seem to enter the picture. The blessing was never explained but it was apparently important, something like getting your part of the will. The blessings of God seemed rather ephemeral, though, since the people were always getting kicked around who had Gods blessing. There didn't appear to be that much benefit for them in terms of living a comfortable life. The original story of Job seemed to indicate that being blessed by God was not equivalent to many good times, at least until some later writer stuck on a happy ending.

The Sermon on the Mount certainly doesn't seem to use blessing quite the same way as I hear it used today. Nor a lot of comfort, as we use the term, in Blessed are the poor, or Blessed or the peacemakers, or blessed are those who mourn. These types seem to always be getting beat up or shot at a lot.

I never found where having lots of friends, health, money, house, etc. was associated with blessing as it was used in these traditions. I do remember in my specific tradition, there were times when those in the church, and apparently still do, counted material wealth and comfort as a sign of Gods blessing and poverty as a sign of Gods curse, like you had done something wrong if you were poor or in ill health and God was punishing you. And if you were particularly well off you were really blessed and should share some of that with the church. I don't know if double blessing came in there some way. People who stood over against such understandings often got stomped on pretty good for saying so.

I'm not so sure what to count as my blessings in contemporary terms. Sometimes I hear reports from church folks who are returning from mission trips to other lands and they recite this mantra of the one thing they learned from the trip was how blessed they are to be living in America. I wonder if they ever think that the people they left behind are cursed or unblessed because they don't live in the U.S.A.

Language can mean anything you want it to mean, I suppose, but it leaves me wondering if we here in America are really all that blessed, or if the things we count (instead of sheep) are blessings at all, or if they are part of our superiority, our better off than, which exposes our insecurity, our profound unhappiness and we must suppress it as best we can by counting the good things.

Maybe we should stop counting our blessings and examine what we can give thanks for in our life, in the lives of others and the world. Giving thanks takes us out of ourselves (unless the only thing to thank is ourselves). Instead of counting up all the things were putting in our shopping cart, we could struggle to be thankful for our whole life (like that Marilyn Monroe moment of lucidity). Maybe that will lead us somewhere. I think I may reply to the next count your blessing email with this, and promise a curse on anyone who doesn't send it to everyone on their entire address list.

#### **WONDER AT THE CO-OP**, Linda Alton, Minneapolis

Recently I spent an unforgettable morning with a visually impaired friend of ours. She had mentioned to me that she had never tried to shop at our local co-op, that it was just too complex. This co-op is an amazing one, the largest member owned non-franchised natural foods co-op in the U.S. (you know, everything HEALTHY comes bigger and better in Minnesota!)

So the next day we spent 2 hours going shelf to shelf, counter to counter, with protective plastic sacks covering hands, touching, feeling, smelling--shrieks of delight. Feeling spiky fruits from Zamboanga, radishes 5 inches x 15 inches. New spice mixtures (I read each name aloud of the 100 or so spices jars, opened probably 25), i.e. 2 varieties of 'curry powder' mixes that she purchased, baguettes out of the oven in the last 30 minutes, the 'demo demon' letting us stand and eat our fill of his Wisconsin Goat Gouda samples, local apples, and pesto. Reading the labels of the 5 kinds of Pad Thai sauces, digging into the basil barrel, the feel and smell the turkey-feta-cilantro sausages in the organic meat section (don't worry, I purchased some of these tactile experiments!). Other customers started interacting with her, commenting on what they used this or that for...and several times I just started crying, being with her in her joy. And I learned how to be in a grocery store with a visually impaired person...she held onto the cart handle, you maneuver through the store in front of the cart...leading the way. It was perfect!

Since then we have had a similar tour of a nearby huge Vietnamese/Hmong grocery store. The Hispanic grocery 6 blocks from here is on our list for May.

#### **RUNNING**, Shelly Hahn, Indiana

I started running about a year and a half ago, about 2 months before my 42nd birthday. For all intents and purposes, I had never run in my life, except as a child at play. I'd never been athletic. I always hated gym class. I was never good at sports. About 10 years ago I started working out regularly--walking, weight training, cardio machines and such--but that just made me healthy, not athletic (so I said).

So why did I suddenly decide to start running? There were a few reasons. My workouts were getting routine and I wanted a challenge. A year earlier life had thrown me a pretty tough curve ball, and I was starting fresh, getting in touch with my own strength--physical and otherwise. But most of all I just wanted to prove to myself I could do it. All my life I'd said I wasn't a runner or an athlete, that I didn't have the body for it, that I just wasn't cut out for it. But for some reason I suddenly realized I had no idea if that was true; it was just what I'd always thought about myself.

I didn't know what to expect when I began. I started running on the indoor track at the Y. At first I would run the straight-aways and walk the curves. Next time out I'd run a half lap and walk a half lap. Then run a lap and walk a lap. And so on. After a week or two of this gradual progress I asked my fitness trainer how long she thought it would be before I could run a mile. Not long, she said. Maybe a couple more weeks. She thought a moment. Maybe less. She stopped and considered again. Actually, I bet you could do it now. Next time, try it.

It was seven laps to a mile on that track and I hadn't run more than about four laps straight at that point. The next time I went to the Y I ran a lap, then 2, 3, 4, 5 6 7! The last couple of laps took everything I had, but I did it! I ran a mile! It was exhilarating! It was exciting! It was empowering! I had no idea I had that in me! I was hooked.

A week and a half ago I ran the Indianapolis Mini-Marathon (13.1 miles) for the second time. I ran well, I felt good throughout, I finished strong, feeling great. I'm a runner. I'm an athlete. It's awesome! And it begs the question: what are the other things I have not been or done simply because I never thought I could? Now there's something to think about!

#### **A DIFFERENT VIEW, Steve Rhea, Houston**

I think I was on the schedule for last week. I knew that, but I am late because even though I was thinking about what to submit, I felt like I was in limbo. I could not come up with any reflection that I thought was, whether positive or negative, important enough to share. I seemed to be in a fog, and I know that part of that was a holdover from the recent election and all its associated after effects.

Today I took a personal day from work because I needed to tend to a lot of details. I had to take to car to the dealer for a modification because of a factory recall. We were having a new television delivered to the house. A contractor was supposed to come around and give me an estimate on restoring some of the brickwork on the house, etc., etc.

Early this morning I dropped off the car at the dealer's, which is about 1.5 miles from my house, and although it was raining a little, I decided to walk home, since I was prepared with trench coat, fedora and a walking stick. This neighborhood is mostly single-family residential with a scattering of apartments, small businesses, and old homes that now function

as law offices, art galleries, antique stores, pre-schools and such. Walking through the neighborhood was great. I saw children being dropped off at schools, spoke to people I had never met, and got a bit of exercise.

Around mid-morning I went to pick the car up. Instead of exactly retracing my previous route, I took a short cut behind a strip shopping center along the easement which was previously a railroad line. This gave me a look into the back yards of houses I had seen the front of before. I began to reflect on the incredible variety of life and actions that go on around me all the time, and the unseen sides of life that make it even more diverse. I realized that this is also true on a much larger scale.

In our time together as a collegial body we used to often talk about the multiplicity of trends that move through history. I felt like I saw that today, and I realized how vast is the universe of activity that goes on around me without my knowing. Most of what I see in the news these days horrifies me, while some uplifts me, and I saw that there is much more than that. There may be terrorists somewhere planning actions that are so far beyond the attacks of September 11, 2001, that we cannot even conceive of them. I am sure that there are also people working to right wrongs and minister to suffering with a commitment stronger than I can imagine. I have always tended to think that no matter how amazing my current world is, it is completely overshadowed by the great events of the past and that the future will always be more amazing. I don't think that anymore. These times are world-shaking for us, and I think they will be seen that way by those that come after us. I am utterly awed by the times that I exist in, and I intend to strive to be more a part of "bending" those trends as we used to say.

#### **DRIVE HOME, Geri Tolman, Boston**

I just got back from my annual "driving mom and her cat back to her Florida home" trip.

It's a wonderful journey that has come to define the beginning and end of summer for me over the years--starting 10 years ago when dad was still alive. At first I was just a "visitor" on the "snow-bird" trip they'd been making on their own for over 25 years; dad condescended to allow me to help with some of the driving. Then there was the one year that he couldn't travel and I accumulated lots of frequent flyer miles instead. For the past four years it's just been mom, me and the cat.

The trip had become routine: stopping in the same towns; eating in the same restaurants; witnessing massive construction projects progress over time; reflecting on the fun we'd had over the summer.

But this year was different. Convinced that we'd be "home" before Hurricane Jeanne arrived, we pulled into a Savannah motel and met those frightened folks with their pets who were driving NORTH, of all things, to Get Out Of Florida. The storm was moving faster than first predicted so it

didn't make much sense to keep heading SOUTH in the face of all that wind, rain and threat of tornadoes.

How does that saying go? "Life is what happens after you've made other plans." We wake up to Life when we are knocked out of our comfort zones. And much depends on our responses.

We saw two examples of people responding to the impending hurricane's damage. The first was a middle-aged couple in the motel lobby; terrified and clinging to each other; telling us that they would surely have nothing to go home to after the storm.

The second was an elderly couple, holding hands while shuffling through one of Savannah's parks that warm and breezy night, each one carrying a pet carrier in their other hand. We walked along with them for a while - I carried their pets while mom and they chatted, sharing their journeys. They told us that whatever they would lose to Jeanne was just "stuff"; and that whether they lost it all, or lost nothing, life would be better afterwards because we all would have "weathered another storm".

In the morning we retreated inland to my nephew's house in Atlanta and thoroughly enjoyed this new adventure after having our plans torn from under us. My 88-year-old Mom fretted that she didn't know the names of those "old folks." I understand why she wishes she could keep in touch with people like that.

### **THREE DIMENSIONS**, John Epps, Malaysia

An encounter with the Word seems to have three parts: an address which is very personal, a set of issues which also hit on the existential level, and finally a pronouncement that provides a new possibility. At least that's the way it has seemed to me lately. Anyway, here goes the story of these three dynamics in my life recently.

We all tend to think of ourselves as indestructible. It's really quite impossible to conceive of our own nonexistence. However much we know and believe and experience, it's still "we" who are the active agents in the process of knowing and believing and experiencing. Some philosophers have had fun with the fact that it's quite impossible to state truthfully, "I died."

So when you confront your own very real destructibility ("contingency" is the more polite term) it comes as an address--not as an intellectual surprise, but as an existential address. Many of us these days have and are experiencing this, and reason suggests that the experience among us will increase in the future.

My own most recent encounter was a medical checkup in which the results suggested something suspicious in the left descending cardiac artery. While the doctor claimed there was no certainty, and I could have the next test at my convenience, he nevertheless prescribed four medications "to be sure." That made an impact. On a somewhat lighter note but no less

impacting, a distinctively middle-aged participant in a recent workshop we were conducting stated very loudly on four different occasions, "At you age, why are you still working?" and "In 20 years when I reach your age..."

When one confronts the inevitable end, whether it's imminent or distant, two very tough issues arise.

First, has it been all for naught? This one is particularly daunting. I have a good friend of long standing who shares with me a little joke: when we finally complete our struggle and die, we'll discover that our life has resulted in the moving of 3 pine needles. That's all. When you look at the world situation, you sometimes begin to think that 3 pine needles moved would be a major achievement.

Does humanity suffer any less? Are people more accepting of each other? Do more people have the capacity and will to deal with their situations? Has our common wisdom gotten into the mainstream? Is there more delight in the world? Is peace more likely?

When the mostly negative answers come back, it gets really clear that, while we're fully responsible, we're certainly not in charge. At that point the temptation is to junk the responsibility and go for a closer relationship with the One who is. But the responsibility doesn't go away, and if in fact we learned anything from RS-1 and OE, it's that the only route to intensified Being is through the intensification of knowing and doing. Access to the One in Charge is through the practical, whether it is developing a village or singing a song.

So is it all for naught? The question doesn't go away, but it's not ours to answer. The answer is already given by the Word: "All that is, is good, even your ineffectiveness."

The second issue is about detachment. I've recently found myself incredibly attached--to people, to habits, to opinions, to health, to projects, to equipment, to places, etc., ad infinitum. And all those things pass away, as do I. We ARE detached, whether or not we live it. That's the second thing confrontation with your death raises, at least it is for me. Practicing that ultimate detachment, depends on real conscious and deliberate deprivations, not just symbolic ones. I find this increasingly difficult.

Once again there's that Word: "You are accepted."

It's probably for reasons like these that someone once said, "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

**TREES**, Cheryl Hood, Kansas City

Somehow in the last few years, my consciousness about this earth has been raised to a dramatic new level. I am slowly evolving into a less anthropocentric creature and stand in awe of the life on this planet that I took for granted or simply didn't see just a few years ago.

It all started when I moved into a house with a great old mulberry tree in the center of the backyard, and a stand of pin oaks behind it. I had never really lived that close to trees in my life. I had either lived in the inner city, where trees were regrettably hard to find; or I lived on the high plains of western Kansas, where one can travel 100 miles in either direction and not find a tree that hadn't been planted there only recently by an overly optimistic backyard gardener.

So it was a revelation to be close enough to observe the daily life teeming in the branches. I saw the many places where all manner of bird species could hide. I watched as they found food in the insects hiding in the bark, or in the berries. I watched squirrels chase each other in and out and around and over its branches as they observed the rites of spring. I appreciated the coolness it brought to my yard in summer. I experienced the cycles of life and dormancy and death as well as the beauty inherent in each cycle.

Recently I came across two separate articles that furthered my reverence for these arboreal beings. The first was about Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Kenya. To oversimplify her role on this earth, she received her prize for planting trees. She put it this way: "We are called to assist the earth, to heal her wounds, and in the process heal our own..." She came to this work in the process of talking to women about problems such as lack of energy, clean drinking water, and food sources. She saw the connection trees had to these very human problems and began a campaign to plant trees - as a source of fuel, building materials, shade, food, and beauty; i.e. abundant life.

The second article was in the New Yorker, about the giant sequoias in California's Redwood Forest. These trees are surely the most amazing beings on this earth. They are thousands of years old, and high up in their canopies, they throw out new trunks and branches at random, often interconnecting each tree with those around it, so those rare human beings who do experience that self-contained eco-system are able to travel from one tree to another across the canopy. It is presumed that their root systems are also intertwined, making the entire Redwood Forest one entity - one living, breathing community, bound together at its roots and in its soaring heights (300-375 feet). In their trunks one can find evidence of death, as they grow around those parts of the trunk that were destroyed by fire in years, or millennium, past.

In the rain forests, when mature trees die and fall, they become nurse logs, i.e., the very elemental source for new life on the floor of the forest. Trees, plants, lichen grow from them and the cycle of life is continued--built on the death of the Nurse Log.

Standing in the presence of these magnificent creatures, I am reminded that intellect and opposable thumbs may not actually be the universe's most favored characteristics. I am humbled.



## THE SIMPLE LIFE, Randy Williams, Texas

The popular singer of some 60 years Tony Bennett turns 80 years old on Thursday. In the late 50s when I and three of my buddies from our high school choir were singing professionally as a jazz quartet in night clubs and supper clubs around the country we worked with Tony at the old Chez Paris in Chicago. We got to know him a little; he referred to us as "those four boys from Texas."

There have been several articles in the national media this week commemorating Tony's birthday and the fact that he's still working and is, in many ways, better than ever. If you've heard and seen him recently you know it's true. The article in Sunday's Parade revealed his "secrets" for successful living. There are three: (1) don't get hung up on "things," (2) love what you do and (3) hold firm to your ideals. It struck me that these three have great similarity to the work done in OE days to redefine the traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Tony's first "secret" has to do with poverty, or as we redefined it, not as being poor, but as being "detached" from whatever we did have. Bennett reports that he does not own a car, boat or a home, but instead lives the simple life, with nothing to lay claim on him or distract him from what he is about--being a singer and entertainer. For me my order days were, from an economic perspective, the most uncomplicated time of my life. We essentially had nothing but were never wanting, owed nothing and were therefore free to be totally engaged, without distraction, in what we were about. This, of course, leads to the vow of obedience, which we defined as "engagement." It's like Tony's "love what you do." He describes his life as being "on a perpetual vacation. I don't need a break. I'm already doing what I want to do." And he keeps doing it effectively at age 80. All this comes together under the vow of chastity, or as we understood it, borrowing a phrase from Kierkegaard, "to will one thing." I recall that we rehearsed frequently that missional, single-minded people neither get nor need a vacation and never retire. I loosely interpret this as what Bennett means by #3 holding firm to his ideals. All he ever wanted to do was to "honor the great American songbook with tasteful performances." He claims he strayed from that once and became physically ill when doing it.

As I find myself, almost half way through phase 4, struggling to rediscover the relevance of these ancient vows for my own life, the focus for me has been on my own continuing quest for detachment. I am reminded daily of the real economic poverty that so much of the world continues to live in and I ask myself, "If there is so much abundance in the world, how is it that some few have so much while so many have so little?" "The moral issue of our times," as we identified it, is still the disparity between those who have much and those who have little, the 85/15. Our family is seeking to launch a "counter-revolution" against the perversions of consumerism and materialism, beginning with the style of

life lived in our own household, reclaiming the simple life and once again becoming detached in order that we might be engaged single mindedly in that which our lives are really about.

There's a song from the 50's, which Tony Bennett may have sung, called "The Simple Life." A couple of the verses go like this:

*I don't believe in frettin' and grievin',*

*Why mess around with strife?*

*I never was cut out to step and strut out.*

*Give me the simple life.*

*Some find it pleasant dining on pheasant.*

*Those things roll off my knife.*

*Just serve me tomatoes, and mashed potatoes.*

*Give me the simple life.*

The 80-year old Tony Bennett is getting set to release a new album of duets in which he sings some of his old songs with other artists. He's going to sing "The Best Is Yet To Come" with Stevie Wonder. Without in any way negating the past, I hope the song comes true for Tony, and for all of us as well.

### **THE EARTHQUAKE AND GOD, Gene Marshall, Texas**

*Note from Terry Bergdall: When the Tsunami occurred in 2004, I dug into my files searching for this reflection from 1989. With permission from Gene, I re-posted it on Earthrise.*

I listened to a radio interviewer talk with a series of clergy about the San Francisco earthquake. He asked each of them this question, "Did God cause the earthquake?"

Billy Graham was among those interviewed. He answered "No," and went on to explain that "human sin" was responsible for the earthquake, and for death, and for all natural disasters. He explained that this present world has been subjected to death and tragedy as a consequence of Adam's fall. He went on to explain that those who are saved from sin can look forward to the day when they will no longer live in a world like this but will be part of a new creation, unmarred by earthquakes and such.

The more liberal clergy also answered "No," to the interviewer's question. "God," they said, "did not cause the earthquake." Most went on to elaborate the view that nature is neutral having its own laws. Neither God nor human sin had anything to do with causing the earthquake. They seemed to glory in various human abilities to cope with this disaster. They talked of God as a being who lived in some other world, but they claimed this God helped us cope here on earth with tragedies like earthquakes. They seemed very certain that we need help from this God and that there does exist this benevolent God who is available to help. They implied that this helpful God is setting a good example for human beings to help each another as well.

Not one of these Christian clergy or Jewish rabbis challenged the interviewer on his question. Not one insisted on raising another question -- like this question for example: What meaning do we give to that awesome power which gives us earthquakes and which also gives us stable ground most of the time? What name expresses the meaning we give this power? Fate? Nature? A Tough World? Not one of these religious leaders raised a question about what it would mean to name this power which gives us earthquakes "God," "our God," "the power we trust and worship and obey." Not one raised the question of what it would mean for our daily living if we used the word "God" to point to that enigmatic power which gives us stable ground and, on occasion, earthquakes.

So, what would it mean for us to name that enigmatic power "God" rather than "Fate" or "Nature" or something else? What if such naming meant a wholehearted relationship of devotion to that power? What would that mean for the living of our lives? Such naming such worship means that we affirm our real situation, whether stable or shaking. It means we accept both unexplainable blessing and unexplainable tragedy as viable parts of our unexplainable lives. It means that we stand in awe of the powers of reality about us. It means that we pay attention and obey the verities that happen to us. We have the freedom to respond appropriately in earthquake-prone places, to build buildings differently, to operate long-range more adequately, to live our lives at attention to the Earth reality that surrounds us.

If we lived in a forest with tigers, we would pay attention to tigers. We would live our lives with the reality of tigers in mind. To me, it seems ridiculous to say that tigers are evil or that earthquakes are evil. Evil with respect to what? When such claims are made, people usually mean that these natural realities are evil with respect to some human-centered value system some worship of humanity as the center of value.

All of us unavoidably confront that awesome power which gives us both earthquakes and stable ground. To name that power "God," -- to worship that power as "our God" means that we have shifted our center of value from the human to the all-pervading mystery within, beneath, behind all things. It means we have become those who love and obey the fullness of mysterious reality.

Looking from this perspective, we see that most of our religious leaders have sold out to the human-centered values expected of us in our culture. We see that they are creating, in the image of the human being, phantom gods which are acceptable in the popular religious marketplace. If we want to be genuine inheritors of the biblical heritage, we have to look deeper than that. The theologian, Paul Tillich, pointed out that we, in our customary human-centered ethics, are "separated from the mystery, the depth, and the greatness of our existence. We hear the voice of that depth; but our ears are closed. We feel that something radical, total, and

unconditional is demanded of us; but we rebel against it, try to escape its urgency, and will not accept its promise."

Tillich's poetry reminds us that we are estranged from the foundations of our lives estranged from the God who gives us the stable ground and the earthquake. If we can experience that estrangement, perhaps we will also experience an "amazing grace" of restoration. Perhaps we will become better friends with the enigmatic power who gives us the earthquake.

**THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM**, David Zahrt, Iowa

I went to my medical doctor recently saying "I am downhearted"--meaning feeling a good deal of depression. Apparently major loss can induce such a state of being. I thought I was making it through the loss of my son, Jay, and my Mother three months later. Apparently this is the way I was 'making it through'. The MD suggested that I try an anti-depressant. He said it would take about two weeks for me to know whether or not it made any difference. After the passage of more than two weeks, I was still unable to notice any difference at all.

So I took out the 23rd Psalm! I re-wrote it so that it was in what I would call today's language. Once I re-wrote it I decided to paraphrase it so that I could extract from it the wisdom for my life at this moment.

I've been using it as an antidepressant. It's beginning to work!

*PARAPHRASE OF 23rd PSALM:*

Reality is my Guardian, I have everything I need; I lack nothing.

I am led to rest in prairie meadows near quiet waters; they perpetually calm and revive my Spirit.

I am guided in the paths of virtue and integrity for the sake of Reality.

When I pass through what seems like death warmed over, I fear nothing. Reality surrounds me and sustains.

There is always plenty on my plate, even in the presence of my enemies. I am eternally beloved and I live in the abundance Reality freely bestows.

Goodness and kindness pursue me every day of my life, and I am at home with Reality as long as I live.

*PRESENT-DAY AFFIRMATIONS GROWING OUT OF 23rd PSALM:*

1) Reality receives me as I am; I am beloved and I respond --  
I am pleased to be alive;  
I embrace my life as it is given'  
I trust my life as pure gift.

2) I am given the ability to perceive and transform --  
Self depreciation to affirmation;  
Adversity into opportunity;  
Apparent paralysis into significant engagement.

- 3) I take time daily to be still and --  
Attend to the movement of Spirit in my life;  
Let action issue from the Center of my life;  
Engage in practices that lead to health in Body, Mind, and Spirit.
- 4) I extend warm regards for others –  
I choose non-defensive outgoingness;  
I look into the eyes of others to learn to know them;  
I suspend judgment and learn their truths;  
What is extended returns to me.
- 5) I am self determined and responsible –  
For my actions towards others;  
For my actions toward the planet.

## Acknowledgements

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Terry Bergdall  
Editor