



Life's Mystery

Life's Hope

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Introduction

Poetry is usually about life, reflecting the experience of the poet. It is not a medium which tends to precise description, but rather embraces an experienced reality in order that this might be understood and shared. By its very nature it encourages exploration of this reality and its re-expression in words natural to the reader or listener. Thus I invite the reader to listen with me to life and consider what words might be appropriate to express her or his or our shared experience.

These poems are not poems of faith (understood as purely and intentionally expressive of a “faith tradition”), but of experience. Poems of experience describe the way life expresses itself, seems and feels, and invite the exploration and expression of this reality. Faith brings insights to bear upon experience and interprets it in the light of a religious tradition, somewhat from the perspective of a theorist and observer. Faith may also bring to the description of experience more than one’s communal faith tradition, rather expressing the insights about God and life gained from individual long-term experience which forms a personal tradition interpretive of life of which one may or may not be consciously aware.

When one writes poems of experience, faith (communal and personal) certainly affects one’s experience and expressions, *but one does not seek to make expression conform*. In poems of experience the poem arises from the experience and is allowed to express whatever it would at the moment. It will perhaps help the reader to know that for most of these I made no attempt to conform them to my faith tradition which exists alongside these experiences and in some ways is expressed within them. It is my hope that the experience of the reader will to some extent find itself at home in the poems. They vary from interpretations of biblical texts to reflections on human experience to occasional pieces.

I would like to indicate that my communal faith tradition, the Moravian Church, has fostered an approach to life and God which is supportive of a particular usage of religious tradition. From its origins in the 15th century the Moravian Church has divided religious matters into *the Essential* (God’s offer of relationship responded to in faith, love and hope), *Ministerials* (that which serves the Essential, such as church, sacraments, Bible, preaching), and *Incidentals* (the different ways things are done). In the context of the

18th century European Enlightenment Moravians spoke of the Essential as *the heart relationship with the Savior*. The *heart* was seen as an inner organ of intuitive perception which could know religious reality directly. Thus religion was not just a matter of mind, of concepts and systems of thought. Concepts were secondary. The church was constituted around the common experience of the reality of God and the life God brought. This approach, would lend itself to poetry, for poetry as language of experience would be more faithful to the reality experienced than concepts could be, the function of which was to define and limit rather than to reflect the reality and enable persons to re-encounter it. It is no accident that the primary Moravian theologian of the 18th century, Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, wrote thousands of hymns and poems and turned the primary Reformation Creeds used by the Moravian Church, the Lutheran Augsburg Confession and the Reformed Articles of the Synod of Berne, into poems (161 stanzas for the first 21 Articles of the Augsburg Confession and 198 stanzas for the first 18 Articles of the Synod of Bern). Poetry was cultivated as a spiritual gift.

By and large I do not much write poetry intentionally and analytically. That does not seem to be my process. Some of the poems arise within my experience and seem to wish to be born, while with others I place myself before a subject or issue and then allow the poem to take shape. Sometimes a poem comes in almost finished form. Other times I need to live with the poem for a while in order for it to refine itself. Beyond the process of refining the form, I also know that I must intentionally live with each poem for a while so that it fulfill its purpose with me. For me poetry has become vehicle for feelings and experiences, their resolution, and the living of life.

Stanzas sometimes express units of meaning, but at other times the meaning of one stanza is resolved in the next. Some stanzas and arrangement of words will be intentionally ambiguous, both because the reality is ambiguous and because the ambiguity opens to the reader more possibilities of meaning. I write words in lines that express pattern and emphasis but give little attention to specific meter and rhyme. I do, however, seek to be aesthetically sensitive to the selection and arrangement of words. At times the number of words in a line is limited for the sake of focus and emphasis, perhaps diminishing to a single word.

I have been much affected by six years of research on Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) who is one of the most influential poets of the 20th century. For our purposes, he seems to have been a mystic who rejected traditional Christianity because of his experience with it and his ambivalent feelings towards his mother, a devout Roman Catholic. However, he was drawn to the mystery of life and the divine. At times this seems a type of pantheism which rejected Christian dualism and affirmed the world. Yet there was also his deep attraction to the God who was beyond world and images and could not be named, influenced by his experiences of mysticism within Russia.

He believed life, as it is, should be experienced and revered, including suffering, pain and death. During his dying from Leukemia he refused medication which would have denied him the experience of his death. The human role in life is to become servant to all of existence: to see it, love it, and praise it. In his poem "Turning Point"¹ he begins with "in-looking," by which he seems to have meant looking into the reality of something or some one until it responded, until it became part of the inner landscape of the soul. His friend Rodin, the sculptor, started him on sensitivity to seeing. However, he discovered, the world asks for more than "in-looking."

¹ See Arthur Freeman, *The Poetry and Spirituality of Rainer Maria Rilke*, unpublished. An excellent collection and translation of his poetry is Stephen Mitchell, ed. and translator, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1989).

For there is a boundary to looking (German, "in-looking").
And the world that is looked at so deeply
wants to flourish in love.

Work of the eyes is done, now
go and do heart-work
on all the images imprisoned within you; for you
overpowered them: but even now you don't know them.

Love does not overpower things and persons, but lets them be, relates to them, and ultimately speaks their existence and praises them so that they live on. Things are always passing away and transient. In "The Ninth Duino Elegy," the answer to the question as to the destiny of humanity is that "everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us," to say and praise the things of this world more intensely than the things themselves. External reality is internalized, transformed within, so that it lives on in the stream of human collective existence: that interior world, "primal forest" within, mentioned in The Third Elegy.

That about which Rilke speaks is an openness to and passion for life's reality, a love for being, which ultimately and deeply becomes a spiritual act and a commitment of the human heart, embracing but transcending individual experience. Thus life and God live within us as well without, and within us the whole of world and human experience dwell. Poetry is the expression and enablement of this and so it plays a significant role in spiritual and life formation. To explore what this may mean for you is your sacred task.

Life's Welcome

To express life in poetry one must first welcome life as a whole, even its pain.

Come Now Life

Come now life into my hands:
All life,
 joy and pain,
 sorrow and passion.
Little power have I to choose,
 nor wisdom.

I welcome you
 that I may know
 life's full expression.

O God,
shape my life until it,
not too neatly wrapped,
and with some mystery,
becomes gift to You,
 -- and you,
that I may not have been
in vain. 1991

When life is welcomed we discover that it is more than others told us or we expected – and it is different. In a sense we live life discovering what is there.

Life Is

Life is
an experiment
to discover
what is there

and how
it might be lived,
with passion.
It's hardly worth

the effort
to merely endure,
to live without some love
for living.

Once others told us
what was there,
and we believed
until

it did not all come true.

Then we began
to learn, unlearn,
unname what for us
they named, perhaps with love.

Much less we knew,
but more we know:
life's mystery,
and You.

You were there,
and heart could know
what mind
could not name.

How quickly
we make into **it**
what really is **Thou**
and seek to own,

control, what cannot,
must not, mastered
be, and like we
pleads for freedom.

How good
to live, to see and hear,
to feel life's passions,
and to somehow touch

an other. How good
to live and enter the mystery
both of world,
and other.

I would not
have missed it
for the world,
for the world, ever.

Just to have been
with pain and passion,
to drink deep the lives
of those I've loved,

to bear within
their stories,
to be recalled
in dream and hope

again.
O what a gift.
And you, O God,
You're worth

whatever is endured.

January 12, 1996

And we seek to discover how to act and react by
discerning what is in life. There may be times
when we need to control, but there are also
times when we need to surrender.

There Are Moments

There are moments
to be seized,
controlled,
owned, labeled
mine.

There are moments
to be fought,
and overcome,
used by powers
I would not own.

But there are times
when one submits
to Mystery,

Wisdom transcending
comprehension.

There are moments
full of God
that one must not
own. They
are not ours.

To seize the angel
Jacob-like,
to struggle till
some gift is given,
and wound,

may be
God's invitation.
Yet,
to control and own
such a time?

Surrender
and obedience
may be the only way
to allow
Divine intent

to find its way,
fulfill its destiny.
How does one know
when to grasp
and own

and when
to let God
and God's moment,
purpose, be?

Discernment,
perhaps,
for when to master
and when surrender.
I'll have to learn.

But it does
seem
that if we listen

hard enough,
we do know.

And then
we must decide
if
we are willing
to let go.

How hard
to live moments
I do not master
and, Peter-like,
be carried
where I would not go.

January 8, 1996

There is risk in living life, but there is also risk
in being afraid of life.

Come to the Edge

I heard a voice:
Come to the edge!
And I was afraid.

The voice demanded:
Come to the edge!
But I will fall!

Come to the edge,
the voice gently pled.
And trembling I came.

And a wind thrust me
into space.

And reaching
to grasp the edge
I found - I could fly.

What if he
had loved me too much
to force me from the edge?

4/12/96

And when we discover how to take life, death
becomes more friend than enemy.

Death, I See Your Smile

Death
I see your smile
You welcome me
with outstretched arms
into your com-passion.

But it's too soon.
Not yet should I go.
But thank you
for your smile.

It's good to know
you are there
when I will
need you.

And to know
that when
the time comes,
you'll welcome me
into your embrace.

Feb. 2, 1996

And we learn to trust the flow of life.

Where Life Goes

Remember,
my friend,
the flow of life
you feel moving
to God knows
where.

Trust its
movement.
You
need
not know
its culmination.

Few know
where life goes,
its fulfillment,
until,
with surprise,
you're there

to reflect;

only
to find again
life rushes on
to some
yet undreamed
destination.

Life's
more journey
than destination.
Arrivals become
part of
ongoing process.

It is only
those
whom you've touched
and who've
touched you
who become

part of the on-going
landscape
of your soul,
and go with you,
as does
God.

God is
God of journey,
and of your
journey.
So,
be not afraid.

Where you go
is
always
where
God
is

and I.

Have
faith
in
the mystery
of your
Destiny.

January 4, 1992

Laughter

is the gift of grace transforming our struggle.

In the midst of
struggle and hope,
in the presence of
pain and joy,
with the echo of
how and when and why
still sounding in
my heart;

In the presence of
world and self,
rebellious shrines
of my being
and hope,
place
of my struggle
and vision;

There came
laughter,
at first, barely
audible from the
depths of somewhere,
and then bubbling forth

from the soil of life
as a gentle spring;

Growing in compass
and power until
into its vortex it
drew and
transformed all,
and its roar
overcame
the darkness.

And all
I'd taken
so seriously
and tried to
shape and fate
in ways I thought
expected
and tried to solve,

Joined in the laugh,
the joke on me
played by diviner
thoughts than mine,
and then
from my own throat
came this
song of songs,

And heaven joined
the mirth.
Laughter rippled
in thunderous tones,
from heavenly thrones
until God's tears flowed
and washed clean
the earth.

I knew
this
I must receive,
and give
as gift.

July 14, 1999

The Human Mystery

And So I'm Here.

I know not how or why I came. It is my sacred
task to reflect.

And so I'm here.
I know not
how or why
I came.

I looked around
and there I was.
What should I do,
this place and time?

From deep within
a voice confirmed,
my friend, you're here, --
indeed.

Reach out, explore,
touch those nearby.
Be not afraid
in this strange place.

You'd not be here
were there no need.
It's not so much
what you may do,

but what you're
called to be.
For in the whole
of time and place

there is a space
where you should be
to weave
the tapestry of time.

1996

The World Within

The setting sun
gently drew
the blanket of the night
o'er towns and fields
and fluffed the pillowed hills.

And day lay down its head
while stars reminded all
of other worlds
and twinkling city lights
promised another day.

And gazing through
my window
at undulating trees
and disappearing shapes
imagination opened her eyes.

My memories found friends
in forms that reached
to greet them.
They danced forth
to their call.

At first I'd beken
to those I knew
and long remembered,
but then they needed
no invitation.

And world within
poured through the portals
of my mind and I
was there where
long ago I'd been.

And all I'd longed
to see again,
and some I'd
rather not,
were there.

And there were more,
for they invited friends
and soon

there was a world
I scarcely knew.

I shut my eyes.
But now they danced
the spaces
of my mind.
And then I knew

the world within
had to be lived,
as well without,
with love
and hope. 1996

When I Look

When I look
into the mirror of my life
behind lies my world,
over my shoulder,
whispering into my ear,
matrix of my becoming.
And there I am, looking back.
My image is me, yet not quite.
It has a depth far beyond
its flat reflective surface.
It seems to know more than I,
and to feel:
the deep currents bubbling
from the springs of my origin,
flowing through the channels
of my heart and mind,
plunging again into their source,
into life's mystery
from which I come.

I was born
not only from her whose body
held me fast and let me go
into her world
of faces and of dreams,
not only from the strange transformations
of body, mind and passion
which gave new worlds
to find,
but also from those long ago

whose faces I never knew,
whose living shaped my life
in human and not so human ways.

I am heir
to an undefineable stream
of human existence.
From my eyes a thousand eyes
look back.
And those who meet me
meet not only me.

And yet I am more
than the sediments
from the streams of my heritage,
more than all who gave me birth,
more than the strange mystery within.

While my heritage
and forming boundaries
shape my being
and suggest who I am,
God calls,
without, within;
would name me,
call me forth
beyond my hope's horizon,
would breathe into me life,
as in creation,
and shape new images
divine, yet human.

God's call was also
presence, warm and sweet,
which brushed my cheek
and heart, offered
a life to share
in cosmic friendship
and love,
which diminishes
the shapeless fear
of future things -- and me.

How strange to look
into the mirror
to see the one I know,
whose depth,

mystery and future,
I do not know.

And you, my friend,
what will you do with me?
Or I with you?
What do my promises mean?
Or yours?
And if you are as strange as I,
what may I hope from you?
How dangerous, yet how delightful.

I'd hope that you and I
can live with what we know
and yet in what we don't,
protect each other,
and love and friendship gain
that we be not alone
and as the God who loves us
take some holy risk.

Wonderful strangeness
that I am,
tis good that I am known
in ways I cannot know;
that there is One
who calls, forgives,
and draws me forth
to ever changing forms
and takes a risk with me.

Today, as in a mirror darkly,
I explore my face
and leave the future
to God and those
who love me some.
But also
I start to love
the strange transforming shapes
I see -- in me.

July 7, 1996
(Influenced by the Duino Elegies of
Rainer M. Rilke)

When we Look Into Each Other's Eyes

A time has come
fated
by our journeys
and our longings
when we look
into each other's eyes
and find a mystery
we know we share
and commit
to a communion
which joins but preserves
each.

As whenever
two find oneness,
the future holds the answers
to what this means
and to the dreams
which haunt and hope us.

Together
we will follow
our Shepherd
and find in journey
of life and hope
and vision
what this
might mean.

The dream
we cherish
is not just ours,
but His,
and He will need to show
where it will go.

And just perhaps
will happen
that which is
in the heart
of God.

And the world
in some way
wondrous
will be different.

Strange
what happens
when we look
into each other's
eyes. 2001

Poetry on Biblical Passages

It is natural to express the meaning of biblical passages in poetic form. After all, there is extensive use of poetry in Scripture and the language of Scripture is full of imagery. One may even regard Jesus' use of parables as a form of poetry, creating a sphere of reality in which what he sought to communicate what may be experienced in individual and varied ways. The language of the parable makes insight possible, but does not produce conformity to a single analysis.

Scripture

looks deeply into life
to grasp its nature
and portray its meaning
that by the brush of imagination
and the color of words
we may paint a canvas
which speaks to mind and heart
and preserves
the dimensions of our existence.

Scripture

is as concerned with aesthetics
as with truth;
but it is concerned
with truth —
often in its most
comprehensive dimensions.

And at its depths
there is God.

Birth of the Wor(l)d John 1:1-18

In time's infancy,
when chaos swirled
o'er the face of a world unborn,
Word was there:
in God's presence,
of God's essence,
in time's infancy with God.

All creation through him came to be,
no thing excepted.
In him life radiantly pulsed,
heartbeat of an intelligible world,
God-sent to illumine understanding:
Light, invincible, piercing
cosmic darkness, never overcome,
though little comprehended.

In the world which still
bore marks of his touch,
his silent presence and
whispered meaning
moved few to bear within
their souls his gifts
and be birthed God's children,
full of grace and truth.

And so, in final gesture
of faithfulness and desperation
the Word became flesh
to pitch his tent in lowly places
to love emerging creation
and share its life
to the end, when lifted up
upon the cross, he might
to him draw all.

For those who gaze upon the stars
and wonder why and who,
for those who midst their struggles
wonder how, -- for those
who seek to love and touch,
for whom creation's, history's,
chaos sometimes seems too much,
who see in all some mystery's meaning
of a world but dimly glimpsed,
he came. 1992

The Resurrection of Lazarus

The door rolled back,
and forth he came
called by the one
whose voice he knew.

"Unbind!" he heard,
and then could feel
hands tearing 'way
what held him fast.

How strange again
to feel the sun
and breathe the air,
fresh from the field.

He did not want
to come -- but knew
he must. For death
would take his Lord.

Then how'd they know
that life was more,
extending from both
sides the door
called death;

that on both sides,
embraced and lived,
both life and door
belongs to God?
And so,

forever, still,
we hear the call
to be unbound
from fear of death -
and life. 1992

Meditation on Lazarus

From the mystery of the
womb
To the silence of the tomb
Life moves through its
stages;

What was gained
Slips through our grasp.

Thrust upon the mercies of
existence beyond our
control,
We are amazed to find
life sustained by God.

Then we realize that
living is not only
birth and growth,
dying is not only life's
final stillness.

Dying is that which
weighs life down,
keeps life from
unfolding,
binds it,
drains its possibilities.

Dying is
fearing to live,
staring upon life
with empty eyes,
seeing nothing.

Living is finding
the Source of life
Who gifts our
existence
and sustains us. 1983

Stabat Mater

There stood his mother grieving.
No longer
could she hold him
close upon her lap
and save him
from all ills.

No longer
could she respond
to outstretched arms
and
for a moment

put his world to flight
in her embrace.

His was the pain
of his suffering,
but hers was the pain
of all mothers
who cannot save their sons
and feel his pain
as well their own.

A sword pierced her soul
and her dreams for him,
for the time, died.
Her laments
rent the skies.
How came this to pass,
so soon?

Beside the cross,
weeping,
she stood,
her memories
flooding her eyes
and running down
her cheeks.

There was no power
to turn history back
to repeal the plan
of God.
Her son was dying
as he said he would.

Would there be more?
Would there be another day
when together
they would stand
and hope again,
embrace again?

Perhaps.

Time will tell.
And yet one must be
honest with pain.
One has

little choice.
One must live
what comes.

But blessed are they
that mourn.

They shall be comforted.
And, if God be
in him
who hung there,
then specially blessed
are those who also know
this is the pain of God.

His suffering, and hers,
may be more
clue to
life and God
than
we
at first
believed.

Great Sabbath, April 6, 1996

Several Poems on Advent

The Dance of Advent

To your coming
I come.
The rhythm
by which you move to me
I move to you
in some eternal waltz
whose music
has been moving
through my mind.

Lover of my soul,
had you not come
I'd not have known
you
were there,
ready
reaching out
I could not have danced
our dance.

My thanks.
The dance of life
need not
be 'lone,
and in your strength
look I beyond
to where we'd go
together;

And wonder
what will be
and how long

the music
and when the time
will come
you'll have to dance
for me. Oct. 25, 1996

Incarnation

What did you think
when you opened your eyes
and looked
upon this strange world
you'd brought to be
and loved,
sometimes from far?

What did you think
when you felt life
moving in arms and legs,
when you lay
upon the softness of
your mother's breast?

What did you think
when you knew
how long it'd be
before you walked
and only sounds, strange,
came from your lips?

What did you think
when you knew
upon the cross you'd die
and struggle, infant-like,
to grasp your destiny
without power?

What did you think
of that vast world
beyond the crib
to which you came,
for which you'd give
your life?

And did you wonder why
and did you wonder how
it'd all come out
and did you wonder
what they'd think
of you, when they did know?

October 25, 1996

There must be a star

There must be a star
somewhere
to call me
and create
the greater horizons
of my soul.

There must be some wise
heeding its direction
traveling
to where it leads,
forever
traveling.

There must be some shepherds
looking up
hearing songs
in the night tending
their flocks looking
for angels.

There must be a mother
birthing a child
somewhere
with great pain
and joy
with hope.

If it had not been,
I would need
to dream it
for how else to live
than by stars
and you.

Oct. 27, 1996

There is a reciprocity

There is a reciprocity:
my world you enter
that I may enter yours.

But yours is world
I've never been.
Had you been here before?

You kept your distance,
creating this world
at the far side of your words.

Words are often used
to keep from
being near, and touching.

But this time Word
became flesh,
bound itself to my world.

Perhaps now I,
with courage
may bind myself to yours.

Nov.-Dec. 1996

Where But In Me

From chaos
a world was born.
Where shall it live
but in me?

From history
a tradition was born.
Where shall it live
but in me?

The time had come
for a child to be born.
Where shall he live
but in me?

A star shines
for all who would see.
Where shall it shine
but in me?

A dream of the future
dreams it could be.
Where shall it be dreamt
but in me?

We are the place,
We are the world,
where all is gifted
to be. December 13, 1999

Meaning of Birth Story

Grant, O God,
that we may find
in the story of Jesus' birth
a paradigm for life,
a way to live,

A model of a world
where God and life
are brought together
and much is born from
this womb.

Help us to hear
in our own life's moments
the words of an angel
who can speak meaning
and knows our destiny.

Help us to know that with God
there is no impossibility,
that life is never barren,
and we are never alone
when we utter, "here I am."

Bring our hearts
to the drama within, without,
especially to God's companionship,
that our life be truly blessed
and possibilities always born.

Bless us by interweaving
the stories of our many dimensions,
country and family,
shepherds and Temple,
as did Luke of Jesus

that we may know
the intricate and rich texture
of our lives, ponder and live
their meaning and breadth..

And where there is suffering
grant hope and vision.
Where there is pain,
gently carry us
and remind us of yours.

Where we are separated
by differences
and lose relationship
remind us of the heart's obligation.

When life seems difficult
birth for us hope
and horizons sustained
by your possibilities.

Help us to know when to question
and when to hold fast
without question,
that hope and vision
be not impaired.

In time threatened with war
Grant us also to fight for peace.
Grant safety and care
to those who serve in our armed services.

As we approach the new year
in secular calendar and church year,
join the story of Christ
with the concerns of days ahead.

And may we always remember
that our eyes have truly seen salvation,
and creation, in the birth,
of the infant of Bethlehem. Amen. 2002

The Passion Story

Meditation on Mark 11:1-24
*Jesus Entry Into Jerusalem in a time of little
peace*

Gentle God
of an often ungentle world,
loving God
bearer of life's possibilities and dreams,

We thank you
that you have shared our life
and walked the path
of suffering and hope.

The world you entered
was as real as ours.
The shadow of conflict
hung over its future.

People struggled with
what should be
and how your sacred house
might be for all.

And how faith
could see beyond
mountains
and trees of withered hope.

It means so much
to find in you
the courage and vision
by which life is truly lived.

We pray for our world
for your protection
of those we love
and those we've not yet learned to love.

May Jesus entry
into all of his world's frightening aspects,
his dialogical engagement with persons,
and his great love,

pattern our living,
as we entrust to him

the life and world
together
we must live.

Passion Week 2003

Crucifixion

A drop of blood
fell from the wound
and tinged the earth
with love.

A drop of sweat
fell from his brow.
The earth drank from
this salty sea.

A tremor of pain
coursed down the wood
and for a moment
the ground in sympathy
sighed.

His cry
from lips drawn taut
took wings,
alighting on the
distant hills.

No solitary cross, this,
no accident or incident
to pass unnoticed.
Somehow life no more
could be the same.

The blood and sweat,
the pain and cry,
joined all those of their
kind and kin
and claimed them
as His own.

October 8, 1995

*No cross without protest
and resurrection*

The shadow
of the cross
weighed heavily
upon life
and seemed to ask
acceptance
without protest,
acquiescence to injustice
and oppression
and pain that need not
have been.

Is cross
to blind the sun
and take away hopes,
rightly dreamed,
demanding,
without question
and protest,
whatever comes
be lived?

Cross speaks
life's
at times
harsh realities
yet also calls
to live with courage
as did he who hung there
silhouetted against the rising sun
of his resurrection
promising empowerment
and dignity.

Life
is cross,
we know too well,
but that's not all.
Cross is always
transcended,
overcome,
in vision
if not in deed.

And life is more,
O so much more.

March 19, 2000

Apocalypse

Dona eiis requiem sempiternam.

*Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna,
In die illa tremenda:*

In die irae

Quando coeli movendi sunt et terra:

Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem.²

Refrain: *Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna.*

John, exile on Patmos,
In The Spirit,
Visioned a new world:

City from heaven,
Like a jewel,

No tears,
No Death,
No mourning or pain.³

². This first stanza is taken from words that are parts of a Requiem Mass said for the dead. A usual part of such a Mass is the envisioning of the Day of Wrath, the prayer for eternal rest, and the prayer for freedom from eternal death. Notice that while at first the language speaks of "them", it soon becomes "my" prayer ("free me, O Lord, from eternal death"). The "Libera me" line then becomes the Refrain to be repeated responsorially after each stanza. Translated the first stanza is:

Give them eternal rest.

Free me, O Lord, from eternal death,
On the day of wrath,
Upon that horrible day:
When heavens and earth are to be moved
When you shall come to judge the world by fire.

³. Rev. 1:9, 21:1-4. Revelation was likely written in three stages. Its origin was in the tradition of the teaching of John the Baptist (chpts. 4-11), modified and added to during the Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66-73 AD (chpts. 4-22), and then this material was again modified by the Christian John who is in exile for his faith on the Isle of Patmos. John's particular contribution is the vision

Refrain

But Oh, the pain in his heart
For churches he would never see
And suffering he could not change.
It was the Tribulation and the End.
"Be faithful," said the voice,
"And I will give you the crown of life."⁴

Refrain

He saw HIM!
HE stood tall,
Hair as white wool,
In the midst of his churches,
Eyes as a flame of fire,
The MAN who had the keys of death and
Hades.⁵

Refrain

And then there swam before his eyes
A Lamb once slain,
Whose blood ransomed humans for God;
A Woman clothed with the sun;
A Dragon waiting to devour
A Child waiting to be born;
And a Harlot waiting to be destroyed,

of chapter 1 and the letters to the seven churches in 2-3, with modifications to the rest of the book. It thus captures within its materials all of the Jewish and Christian suffering and hope of the first century. Though John was not author of all of the materials, its visions gave expression to the pain and vengeance within his soul.
⁴. Rev. 2-3, 2:10. In Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic the period of the Great Tribulation was seen as a time of terrible suffering preceding the end.

⁵. This stanza is taken from the vision of the "Son of Man" in Rev. 1. The term "MAN" or its equivalent "Son of Man" was used in Apocalyptic literature of the original heavenly MAN after the pattern of which earthly man was made. This MAN was thought to be reflected in Gen. 1, and the earthly man/Adam was described in Gen. 2-3. The heavenly Man was expected to aid in the final struggle with Satan and the ascended Jesus was identified with this person.

Drunk with blood,
On a scarlet Beast. ⁶

Refrain

And heaven poured fire upon the Harlot City,
Till she writhed in pain.
And millstones stopped,
Lamps went out,
The bridegroom in silent anguish
Clutched his lifeless bride.
And She was no more. ⁷

Refrain

And John remembered a LAMB ONCE SLAIN,
And saints whose blood stained the earth,
And HIS winepress that poured blood of
vengeance
High as a horses bridle.
And he saw the birds swirl the crimson skies
Over a crimson earth
For the supper of the slain. ⁸

Refrain

And the pain of the world rose,
Beginning like a wisp of wind,
Gathering the world's debris,
Till it screamed in clouds
That twisted and turned
Until all seemed pulled within its vortex.

Refrain

And the cry of every mother
And of every lover
And of all dashed hopes
Blackened the skies.

⁶. The Dragon represented Satan; the Child, the Messiah; the Harlot, Rome. Rev. 12-17. The Lamb once slain (Rev. 5) may have been derived from Is. 53:7. In John 1:20 John the Baptist describes Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

⁷. Rev. 18.

⁸. Rev. 5, 14:17-20, 19:17-21.

And John pressed his hands to his eyes
To shut out what he saw with his soul.

Refrain

And John screamed: "NO MORE!"

And suddenly
There was silence.
And the MAN with white hair and eyes of fire
Became a LAMB STILL SLAIN
With no fire and bloody winepress.

Refrain

In pain the LAMB cried from a cross:
"Why have you forsaken me?" ⁹
And its sound was taken by the hills and the
mountains
Till the earth reverberated,
And his cry pierced heaven.

Refrain

And there was another VISION.
[THERE MUST ALWAYS BE
A VISION!]
A river of LIFE,
Bright as crystal, flowed from the
THRONE OF GOD,
From which trees with leaves for healing
Drew their strength.
AND THERE WAS NO MORE ANYTHING
ACCURSED.¹⁰

⁹. Mark 15:34.

¹⁰. This last stanza is taken from Rev. 22:1-5 which is really the conclusion of the last of the visions (21:22-22:5), after which a number of paragraphs are added for various purposes. In a world where so much has been destroyed, this last vision preserves the "nations" and speaks of their illumination and healing rather than their destruction. The poem interprets this as John's repentance of his anger and the devastation he envisions for his world. There has been enough of suffering and too little of the God of the LAMB STILL SLAIN. The emphasis in Revelation on the LAMB ONCE SLAIN, leaves his suffering behind so that he became the vengeful RAM of

Refrain

1989

Engagement with God

The relationship with God is a journey in which we discover each other.

O Dearest Friend

O dearest Friend,
God of the long years
and old times
and now.

I forgot you.
Do you suffer - my neglect?
When I'm gone,
Absorbed in my struggle,
Do you remember me?

Time splashes on its way,
bounding o'er rocks,
round curved banks,
pooling in eddys,
dancing hard in the rapids -
it will not wait.

We remember and promise
to each other
a time together
of talk and silence,
of being - together.

We promise a time
of walking - together
into the future,
hand in hand.

And promise not again
to forget - so soon.

Apocalyptic thought. To be the LAMB STILL SLAIN means he still takes the suffering of the world to himself and gives it expression, and the last three stanzas of the poem reflect this.

'Tis wonder-full to know
each time we're lost
we find each other,
and you do come
where we do seek,
- wherever.

Perhaps
we never
really lose each other
after
all.

Perhaps
we're
bound - together
by that strange
force
called love.

October 7, 1995

How Rich You Are

My God,
how rich you are.

Our Father who art
in heaven, and on earth,
you call me son
or daughter
as case may be.

You Son who
shared our flesh
and history,
bore our pain.

You fought
the powers of evil
gathered there,
which nailed you fast,

but not so fast
you could not
rise
into our hearts.

And you Spirit,
maker of holiness,
transformer of
the human,
with some limits,

Be everywhere
that God should be
that all you touch
is drawn by
tenderest force

and
with life and justice
express
your new creation,
called to its destiny.

O breath of God,
breathe o'er world
and me, and all,
my heart would be
your sanctuary.

These are your names,
though you are One.
Your many names
do free
to name you more:

Servant, Lover, Mother,
Wisdom, Word,
Adam from Heaven,
eternally Wounded,
Friend,

Fullness, eternal No-thing
beyond all names.
Grant that your names
never become walls
of my making

to keep me
distant
from
your love.

Whisper

Whisper that you are near
gentle mystery
of my days and years.

Let me know the smell of roses
and the gentle touch
of a breeze

upon my cheek
and a rising within
in response.

Once I hardly overheard
your thoughts
and overlooked

the gentle weight
of your hand
upon my heart

and your meaning
and intent
in the course of things.

Yet come to think,
you were there,
of another dimension

of hope and light
and gentle persuasion.
How strange!

I'd always hoped
for power
and overcoming.

And yet you shine
like setting sun
o'er forms and shapes,

in the gathering dark,
mysterious, but
transformed in gold

January 12, 1996

by which you
paint the background
of my existence, as an icon.

April 24-6, 1996

Unity Arises

Unity arises
where we discover
that we are touched by the same God
and that life which flows within us
has a common origin.

As we speak of this
we draw further apart,
each in the direction of our own description:
a necessary, exciting, but at times
painful and alienating, task.

And so
over the distance of our descriptions
we shout: REMEMBER!
We are brothers, we are sisters.
Lest we forget.

And while we describe,
we frequently stop
to draw from the well
of our common existence
to be reminded
of the One
from Whom all live.

March 1995

There is a throne

There is a throne
deep in my heart
I pray
you'd take
to center
me in you.

and by your love
and power
help me to live
'midst all
the powers
within, without.

But I do pray
that I would grow
mature with you,
with others,
to take my
place in life.

Whate'er
you'd make of me
I'd not forget
you are my life.
I can't create
your gift,

nor would
I
ever
wish
to be
alone.

December, 1996

O Coming Jesus

O coming Jesus, come!
Come where I am.
There's no place else
that I can be -- and live.

When touching you
I know
the mystery far transcends
my time and place.

But come to me -- here;
love me -- here. Here
let me feel the strength
of your embrace.

Grant to each time
and place your grace
that all may know,
as I, your heart,

and find the heart
and hope by which
to live
and serve,

and beyond
the passion to make all same
join those who, in other
lands and here, are yours.

May 10, 1995

Spirit Descending

Spirit descending
all life transcending
giving unending
creation mending.

Life now fulfilling
destiny completing
wholeness restoring
person becoming.

None else is thrilling
my heart compelling
until my dwelling
in your kind blessing.

Rising, I'm living
in your love thrilling
grasping your hoping
finding my dawning.

Now is the being
I must be seeking
but there is dreaming
found in your keeping.

Silently standing
in your deep loving
I find myself drawing
closer to you.

August 12, 1966

Christ of the Wounds

Christ of the wounds,
come gently to me,
embrace all my longing,
held in your arms.

Mystery of living
more than I grasp
sustain my vision
speak words of caring.

The plantings of time
on the path that I walk
entangle my feet,
would keep me from you.

Yet I see beyond
to the place of your going
and follow the touch
of your hand upon mine.

August, 1996

Nature as Parable

Nature reflects reality and suggests profound
questions.

Black Butterfly

Black butterfly,
delicate jeweled
effluence of life,
so quickly gone.

One moment basking
in the sun,
and in one winged swoop
- - gone.

How quickly
not just moments,
but life's life
passes on.

So we who endure
few moments longer
and leave some history
are soon gone?

Are we, in truth,
as grass, withered,
carried in fate's warm wind,
where we'd not go.

And does it matter
that we have been?
Are we remembered
- - somewhere?

Each living thing
persists, insists
its life and worth,
not lightly dies.

Perhaps there's One
who holds in love
and memory
each living thing.

And grants to them
a future.

Swimming

Swimming
deftly
into the blue
sea of sky
the bird
cleaved air
with wings
and song
until his form
I scarcely saw
and there was only space
where he had been,
and blue.

But left
behind
his song.

Ocassional Poems

The Experience of AIDS

What if our time of life
could be serenely
spent
in form of vine,
tendrils
tightly grasping
some greater form
secure
no thought for 'morrow
or today
no passion, dread,
no hope and love,
just being there?

Why then to be human,
to be aware,
to feel life's hastening stream
flow through our veins
and rush, unchecked,
into those depths
where silence reigns?

Why have to love
and bind our hearts
to those whose fate, like ours,
slips through our grasp
and leaves us lone
to think upon our loss?

This fleeting life
and those whose fleeting lives
move swiftly by,
and every tree we see
and roses hued with dew
and airy call of birds
and smell of leafed woods
after the rain
fall gently into heart and mind
and live there still
like some vast space
where world and all exist
to be recalled
to never die

to laugh and cry
again --
perhaps that's why.

O, to remember
and give to each the gift
again to live.
And to love,
for to remember's not enough
if in remembering there's no
passion
and if remembering's
casual
and does not reconstruct
and cherish
the face and voice
and walk and hope
and touch and mind,
and hold in heart
with longing
and with freedom,
letting be the one
we often tried to mold.

Whatever worlds await,
whatever hope for
those whose moment
slips beyond our grasp,
whatever visions for ourselves,
to NOW have loved
and felt another's soul
flow into ours
to birth life
from our womb or from our heart
must be creation's
truest hope.

Praise to life
and to the God of life
and to each gentle breeze
whose touch does press
upon our cheek
and to the grass
beneath our feet
and to the warmth
of earth
and to the falling rain

and to the clouds
transforming in the sky
and to you, my friend,
who, if nowhere else,
shall live
within our heart.

Based on the theme of Rilke's Ninth
Duino Elegy, for World AIDS Day,
Nov. 15, 1992

College Reunion

O God

O God,
whose mystery fills galaxies,
shapes the patterns of nature,
and the depths of mind and heart

who gifts us with life
and possibilities and
joins us to the meaning
of an unfolding cosmos

who in the midst of life's realities
calls us
to victory, hope and joy,
beyond mere enduring;

whisper that you are near,
gentle Mystery
of our days and years.

Let us know the smell of spring
and the gentle touch
of friendship

and a rising within
in response
to memories

of walks and halls
filled with
those we once knew
and still cherish.

We who now gather
in this convocation thank you
for the length of years
that shape the horizon of our past,

for forefathers and foremothers
whose learning and joy
shaped the places
where they lived,

and for the present tapestry
of all those involved
in the life of this institution,
and for those

whom today
we especially honor:
distinguished alumni
retiring faculty

We celebrate education
which informs the mind,
broadens the heart,
and joins us

to the tradition,
wisdom and values
which fill yet
transcend time and place

and enable us
to fulfill our destiny
as those responsible
for world and future.

May we have learned
from the suffering,
pain and horror of past years

that no place
or people
are too foreign
to be our kin.

Whisper that you are near,
gentle Mystery
of our days and years.

Let us know the smell of spring
and the gentle touch
of friendship

and a rising within
in response
to memories. Amen

Written for the Alumni Convocation of
Lawrence University, Appleton, Wis.,
June 1999

In Chaos
Prayer, September 11, 2001

We thank you God
that into the chaos
and uncertainty of this world
you have sent your Son and Spirit
to promise us your love and presence
that we may live with hope,
without doubt or question,
knowing that our suffering
is yours,
owned on the cross.

We know that:

Where there is darkness
there is your light.
Where there is death
there is your life.
Where world disintegrates
there is your world
When future is uncertain
there is your future.

And life is ours
as indestructible gift.

We thank you that you remind us
to discover our world
in the light of yours,
as joy, hope, and possibility,
as creation yet to be realized,
unlimited by boundaries of the present.

And so we celebrate,
believe and trust
what is beyond us
but for us
and gift to us
from YOU. Amen.

Life in the Face of Limits

Written for the Residents
of Good Shepherd Hospital, Allentown

Each person is a being unique.
No one is exactly the same as another.
Some of our differences are by nature.
 Some are by accident.
We experience anxiety in the presence of those
 too different
 and in the presence of our differences.
We wonder how to relate
 and how to be related to.
And yet spirit speaks to spirit,
and we find in the heart, soul,
 and embodiment of each
that which makes us distinctively human.

How strange and wonderful our differences,
and sometimes, how painful.
But is there really any normative way to be,
and in our being,
is there any way without pain -- and joy?

Whatever we can become,
we must with all our soul and courage affirm.
Sometimes we have no others who can do this
 for us.

Whatever our limits, we must grasp
who we are and our transcendence.
We live within this world and within the body.
But also we transcend it.
Like soaring eagles we engage in flights
 through our inner and spiritual reality
and for moments soar free,
to return again
to live with new strength

and vitality
within our limits and possibilities.

We deeply rejoice
when we discover those who will affirm us
 as we are,
who will uphold us
 when we cannot uphold ourselves,
who will receive the gifts
 we may struggle to offer,
who will share our joy at being alive
and live with us our anger and tears.

We are!
We are children of God and God's world
and children of this earth!
We have bodies,
but also souls!
Woe if we forget either,
for we diminish our possibilities
and misunderstand our existence.

With courage
and God's blessing
I will be,
and I will will
to be.

1996