

FROM THE MIND AND HEART

OF

CHUCK MAXFIELD

October, 2015

I would like to share with you some poems and sketches that I have written over the years. I hope you find them entertaining and provocative.

Part I: Family

After the Dandelion Prayer, with which I identify, I have several pieces inspired by my family.

Part II: Memories of Ministry

As the 45th anniversary of my ordination approached, I was encouraged to write down some of my memories of ministry. Some of these were written at this time; others I had written earlier, and included in this collection. These are the events that have shaped me as a person and as a minister. Most of the names have been changed, along with some details, and my memory is imperfect. But these encounters I can never forget.

Part III: The Iraq War

In the period 2001-2002, as our government tried to build up enthusiasm for a war in Iraq, I spoke out as best I could. These items are from that time.

Part IV: Year of Transition

In 2005 Christyann and I separated, after 37 years of marriage; a year later we were divorced. During this year of transition I did a lot of thinking, praying and journaling, to re-invent myself. Also during this year it became necessary for me to place my mother, who had been living with me, into a nursing home. The following year she died. These writings come from this year of transition.

Part V: New Life

In 2008 I met Connie Lezenby, and in 2010 we were married. These writings come from the new life we live today, and from our travels.

THE DANDELION PRAYER

Lord, make me like a dandelion,
Though others may despise me
and try to poison me
and root me out
may I never cease being,
a little speck of sunshine on this broad green earth.

May the roots of my faith sink deeply into the earth
So that try as they might,
Mortals shall never totally destroy me,
And I will keep coming back,
a little speck of sunshine on this broad green earth.

May my acts of kindness and love
Disperse like little parachutes carried by the wind,
Bringing sunshine to others,
'Till there are brilliant fields of sunshine
all over this broad earth.

MY PRAYER FOR MY GRANDSON

on the occasion of his baptism in 1997

Living God, I look into the face of my new grandson and I see the future -
I see a new soul launched on the ocean of life.

I know not what lies ahead,
if his life will be short or long,
if he will be strong or sickly
if he will be rich or poor.

I pray for your help, that he might navigate through whatever storms he passes in the future.

Living God, may this new person grow up to be a person of *character*.

May he have a sense of right and wrong and the desire to do the right.

May he grow up to be a man of his word, that people may say, "If Alex Maxfield said it, it must be true." This is my prayer.

Living God, may this new person grow up to be a person of *compassion*. I don't want him to grow up too much, if growing up means becoming hard and unfeeling. My prayer is, that no matter how old he gets and what hardships he passes through - his eyes will still become moist when he sees someone hurt. May he always sympathize with the hardships of others, and may he have a heart to give of himself in love.

Living God, may this new person grow up to be a person of *conviction*. May he stand up for what he believes and speak his mind, no matter what others think.

Living God, I know that none of this is possible without *faith*. And so I pray that this new person will grow up to be a person of faith. May he rely on the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and not on his own strength. May he grow to know prayer as a living reality - intimate communication with you.

Living God, because "perfect love casts out fear," I pray that this new person will always know that he is loved. I thank you, God, that his mother and father are filled with your love, and love their new son so deeply. Sustain them in their love, I pray. Surround my grandson with love in church and from friends and neighbors and extended family - and so help him to discover your perfect love for him.

Living God, I thank you for the gift of life and for this new life - Alexander Maxfield.

Good Shepherd, watch over this little lamb of yours - protect him from evil - guide him to green pastures - and keep him in your love forever.

Amen.

YOU CAN CALL ME DAD

"Dad," she said hesitantly,
Then added, "May I call you that?"
"Sure," I said, as if it didn't matter.
What does a woman call her father-in-law?
"Dad"'s as good as anything.

But then I thought,
and thought, and thought:
She never had a father
not an earthly one
raised by a teenage mother - on her own -
and did a darn good job.
She never had a father
not an earthly one
It's kind of late, but I'll take the job,
You can call me Dad.

But I haven't earned the title:
I didn't change her diaper,
I didn't pat her back when she had gas,
I didn't read her bed time stories,
I didn't bandage her scrapped knee,
I didn't go to teacher conferences,
I didn't hear her band concerts
or whatever it was she was in
in High School.
I haven't earned the title - her mother did it all
Mom and Dad and everything else.

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I didn't earn the title - but I like it

You can call me Dad.

You see, I never had a daughter - just two sons -

and so I missed -

well, I don't know what I missed -

You see, I never had a daughter - just two sons.

But you can be my daughter

and I will be your Dad

And I'll do whatever Dad's of daughters do

- I'll be protective and proud.

"Dad," she said hesitantly,

Then added, "May I call you that?"

Sure . . . any time . . .

You can call me Dad.

To my sons on Fathers' Day, 2006

When you came from your mother's womb
You were so tiny!
You were wet and messy and you cried.
I looked at your tiny fingers and toes,
your amazed eyes,
and I was amazed.
What a miracle!
What a responsibility!
And I was so young
and knew so little of life.

Today I see you, grown men,
and I see a greater miracle.
More wondrous than those tiny fingers and toes
is what you have become on the inside.
MEN-who are gentle and kind;
MEN-whose word is true;
MEN-faithful and loving to your own families;
MEN-respected and trusted by others;
MEN of integrity.

I'd like to take the credit,
but my role was small.
Through me or in spite of me
and many other people
God has worked a miracle.
God has made you MEN.

And I have received
more than I deserve;
A hundred thousand times
more than I deserve
in my sons.
And I can only say
thank you.
Thank you, thank you, thank you God
For the miracle you have performed.
Your Dad

PARENTS

When my children became as old
as my parents were when I was a child
I began to see my parents in a new light.

I thought they were old,
but they were so young.
I thought they knew everything,
but they were just beginning to learn.

They were my gods:
they provided and protected.
I looked up to them
and loved them.

When the gods yelled and screamed at each other
my world turned to chaos.
When the gods were preoccupied and withheld their love
I was lost.

Now I understand
their job insecurity
their financial fears.
I see their disillusionment
as their dreams of "happily ever after" were shattered.

They were not gods,
only human beings.
Young ones at that,
doing the best they could.

How easily, now, I can forgive.

MEMORIES OF MINISTRY

John and Leola

When we went to Vermont for my interview to become intern-year Pastor, John and Leola hosted me and my fiancée. An older couple, they appeared young in their affection for each other. John was quiet, but often surprised you with a witty response. Leola did the talking for the two of them. John had run the general store, and was also postmaster for many years. He had recently retired; the general store closed; someone else took over the post office. John and Leola continued to live as they always had, on the second floor over the no-longer-store. The first floor was mostly open space with randomly scattered counter display cases, and other remnants of the store.

At our first meeting they hosted a sugar-on-snow party for us and the other members of the Parish Council. We enjoyed our feast of maple syrup hardened on contact with snow, pickles and donuts. We conversed around the table; I was not aware of any formal interview.

As a conscientious citizen, John had wanted to serve as a representative in the state legislature. He felt that he should not, as long as he was a federal employee (postmaster). Now that he had retired, he was free to run. The three towns of East Montpelier, Calais and Woodbury composed the representative district. As the representative who was retiring was from East Montpelier, there was a consensus it was Woodbury's turn. John ran. He had cancer; the prognosis was not good. But he hoped against hope that he could take his seat in the legislature.

Mary, another church member, also got papers signed to run. This was the Republican primary, but there would be no contest in the general election. John and Mary both served on the board of the same church - of which I was pastor. Their telephones were on the same eight-party line. The main issue in the election was John's health: would he be able to serve? There were accusations of dirty tricks: was Mary listening in on conversations between John and his doctor? Mary and Leola had some harsh words for each other more than once on the way out of

church.

The most important sermon I gave that year was on James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asking to sit in the places of honor beside Jesus, and the resentment among the rest of the disciples. I don't recall just what I said, but I didn't have to mention any names for the congregation to understand to whom it applied. Mary and Leola both expressed appreciation of the sermon.

John won the election; he was never well enough to take office.

It happened to be Valentine's Day when I called on Leola to ask how John was doing. He had died that day. She shared her sorrow. I listened.

I went home. My wife had prepared a delicious dinner of food I liked. But I wasn't hungry. She knew something was wrong. I had pain in my abdomen. She rushed me to the hospital. By midnight my appendix had been removed.

I missed what would have been my first funeral as a minister. The church was packed - the only time that year. The Speaker of the House was there. The Lieutenant Governor was there. I was in my bed at the hospital. They all prayed for me.

Alice and Ann

Alice and Ann had what they described as a "Boston marriage." I had never heard that term before. They were two women who loved each other and lived together like a married couple.

Following their graduations from prestigious Eastern colleges, they packed up their stuff and moved from Philadelphia to northern Vermont.

Ann was one of the few people in town with a steady paying job - she worked in a bank in the next town. She had organized a credit union for her impoverished community. People brought their meager savings to her, and came to her for loans. Any money not loaned out was kept in the bank where Ann worked. Ann and Alice also conducted the Sunday School, and Ann was President of the Parish Council. The people knew, trusted and respected Ann and Alice for the people of compassion and integrity they were.

Muriel

Every morning Rita got her mother, Muriel, out of bed, fed her breakfast, left her something for lunch, then went to work. In the evening Rita came home, made supper for herself and her mother, cleaned Muriel up, and put her to bed.

As a minister-in-training, Muriel was my first shut-in to visit. Many questions arose in my mind because of Muriel. The teachers at my seminary emphasized a *God who acts*. God is not a passive "ground of being," but is an active participant in the affairs of the world. The God who heard the groans of the slaves in Egypt, took action by sending Moses and parting the waters of the sea. We who believe in a *God who acts* should also take action against injustice and oppression wherever we see it.

But what about Muriel? What action could she take? Perhaps there is more to life than what we can do.

For Mrs. C.

I called on Mrs. C. the day she returned from her fiftieth wedding anniversary. One might expect a person to be basking in the afterglow of a special day. But that was not the case with Mrs. C.

In 1917 her sweetheart went off to war in France. When he came home after the war he was in the hospital for a while. There was nothing wrong with him physically. They called it "shell shock."

After a while he appeared to recover, left the hospital, and they were married. They had the same dreams of home and family as any newlyweds. But it was not to be. It soon became evident that he was not all right. He would never be right again. He became violent. He was soon back in the hospital. Mrs. C. went to see him every day-then every week. Sometimes he knew her, sometimes not. After a while, not at all.

For their fiftieth anniversary the staff at the V. A. hospital brought in a cake, and sang, and were all cheerful-and he had no idea what it was all for. Mrs. C. drove back to her empty house.

An anniversary is a time to look back and to reflect. Mrs. C. remembered the young man she had loved, who went off to France, and the broken man who came home. She remembered the dreams and the hopes that young people have, that never came to be.

The history books say that World War I ended in 1918. That's not true. War isn't over when it's over. In 1972 the United States was fighting a war in Viet Nam. But in one house in my town one lonely woman still felt the heavy burden of a war the rest of us had long forgotten.

War isn't over when it's over. A war lives on in each survivor for the rest of their lives.

Howard

The letter in the mail said that the Board of Selectmen had appointed me to the Conservation Commission. Would I accept? This came to me out of the blue. Of course I was concerned about the environment. Of course I would be honored to serve my community in any office. I accepted.

Kevin, a member of the Conservation Commission, called me and asked to speak to me in person. He thought that Howard, the chairman of the Board of Selectmen, had placed me on the commission to spy on them and to somehow control them. This took me by surprise. Howard was a member of my church, but he had said nothing to me in advance about this appointment. I assured Kevin I just wanted to do my civic duty. I was not interested in taking sides in any political contest between the commission and the selectmen.

On the Commission, I organized and ran our annual roadside clean-up day. I participated in our discussions, which were free from acrimony and decisions were usually reached by consensus. Perhaps Howard had appointed me to the Commission to be a calming influence - to lower the heat.

Local politics often featured tension between Howard and the more progressive elements in the community. Howard was "the establishment" - a financially well-off real estate dealer who - in their judgment - did not know what others suffered.

Howard and his wife had four sons. Two died in infancy - Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. A third, about my age, was a hemophiliac. I visited him often as he was frequently in the hospital. His was the first funeral I had of someone my age. The fourth son, a healthy high school student, collapsed one day at football practice. His cancer was treated and promptly brought under control.

If Howard, from time to time, at Selectmen's meetings, snapped at some petitioner, and was short tempered, I understood why. His critics felt he was a privileged person who did not know what others suffered. Perhaps. But he did know suffering. The first noble truth of Buddhism is that all persons suffer. No one escapes. No matter how privileged someone appears to be, they are not immune.

Jack

Jack was a bum. I don't remember how we first met. It was either when he came to me asking for a handout, or when I was delivering surplus food. He drifted around among the welfare motels. I soon learned that hand-outs never brought positive results. I sometimes gave him a ride, but he declined any ride to an AA meeting or to treatment. I thought it strange that he always wore long sleeved shirts year round. It never occurred to me that this might be to cover up needle marks from drug use. The alcoholism was obvious.

One Saturday evening he showed up at my door.

"I'm ready," he said.

"Ready for what?"

"I'm ready to go for treatment."

This meant a ride to the state hospital, two hours away. I had a sermon to write, but I considered this more important.

We woke someone up at the State Hospital, who interviewed Jack, and said, "We can't take him. He has too many medical problems. These must be treated first before we can help him here."

So we drove to the General Hospital. The doctor in the Emergency Room gave Jack a thorough exam, and reported, "We can't help him here. His primary ailment is alcoholism. We can't help with these other problems until his alcoholism is treated."

We told him about our visit to the State Hospital. The Emergency Room doctor called the doctor at the State Hospital - woke him up again - and after a lengthy conversation they worked out a plan to cooperate in treating Jack.

I think it was 3:00 AM when I got home - with a sermon to finish. I was not imaginative enough to use my night's experiences in a sermon. I put something together and preached that morning.

The last time I saw Jack, his room was clean, and he looked clean, alive, and alert, and was going to meetings regularly.

I remember one important lesson Jack taught me. When he walked down the street, he spoke to all the dogs in a friendly manner. He taught me to do the same.

BORING IS BEAUTIFUL

in a woman's voice

That Gail! She's a fool! Leavin' Ernie and the farm to go to the city. She said it was *boring* here. She said Ernie was *boring*. She wanted more excitement in life. Her Mom and Dad, they told her she was a fool. Poor Ernie, he didn't know what hit 'im. But that's O. K. Her loss is my gain. I thank the Lord for the day I found Ernie. He's mine now. And next week we're gettin' married.

It is true, Ernie don't talk much. He treats every word like a fifty dollar bill; he's not gonna let it go unless he really has to. But he don't need words, not for me. I just look in his face and I see what's in his heart. There's nothin' phony about Ernie, nothin' hidden. And it's all good.

Ya know, excitement ain't all it's cracked up to be. When I was with Ralph, we had excitement. Ralph would come home drunk; there'd be yellin' and screamin'; he'd start swingin' for the least little thing. We had lots of excitement then: Ambulance, police cars, all with their flashin' lights and sireens, all comin' to our little trailer. Gettin' patched up in the Emergency Room; goin' to court; callin' the cops every time he violated the protection order. Oh, we had plenty of excitement, more than enough. I'll take *boring* any day.

Just look at 'em. There's Ernie on all fours, my little Ruthie on his back, playin' horsie; both of 'em all smiles and giggles. He loves her as if she was his own. I found me a man; a real man! Strong arms, that never hit, only hold me tight. And I found Ruthie a real Daddy. Twenty minutes in the sack don't make no man a real Daddy; there's a lot more to it than that. And Gail's folks, they treat Ernie like a son and me like a daughter. They love Ruthie too, and babysit when I need 'em.

Ernie and me, we're a team. At milkin' time I go ahead and wash the bags, then Ernie comes and puts the machines on. And I help make hay when he needs me. We work hard; and at the end of the day we're tired, and it feels good. Sometimes on these long summer evenings, when all the work is done, we go for a walk, Ernie and me and Ruthie. We walk along the edge of the fields, holdin' hands. We take turns holdin' Ruthie and lettin' her walk. We see the corn growin' with the ears just comin'. We see the sun goin' down, the red clouds in the west, the sky slowly gettin' darker. Ernie puts his arm around me. And I know life is good. I know Ruthie and me are safe. If this is *boring*, I'd say *boring* is beautiful.

Adolf

"Do you believe in God?" That was the question the doctors and social workers asked Adolf, after they had run every test. The cancer that had been eating away at him for several years was going to kill him.

"Do you believe in God?"

"I didn't used to, until I met Pastor Maxfield and started going to his church."

I was surprised - and humbled - when Adolf's wife reported this conversation to me. Somehow, I must have come along at the right moment, for God to use me, to give Adolf hope.

Adolf was a solidly built hard-working farmer. The doctors were awed by his remarkable tolerance of pain. He just kept working, kept living, and said little.

So what did I say that gave him hope? Was a non-judgmental gospel of grace like the sunrise of a new day for him? Different from his past experiences of religion? Or was it the genuine spirit of acceptance in the life together of the congregation?

Adolf died a few months later. The neighbors came together to bring in the harvest for the young widow.

BY FAITH WE CAN SEE IT

Sometimes when we hear a song, it reminds us of another place and another time, and all the feelings of that place and time come back to us. Whenever I hear "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," it brings back a memory, a picture, and feelings, of one particular time.

It was a cold December day in the Dakotas. The sky was a bright blue, with a few cumulus clouds being drawn across the sky at a rapid rate. I was on a hill, in a cemetery, with a group of people. Below us, the Missouri River, which is really a lake there, was also bright blue, dotted with white caps. A few yards beyond the head of an open grave stood George, a small rugged Indian volunteer minister of a little Pentecostal Church. Standing beside a white horse, he played his guitar, and sang a song in the Dakota Indian language. I couldn't understand the words, but I knew what it was by the tune:

There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father waits over the way,
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

The open grave was for Donald, a sixteen year old boy who had frozen to death. In the long Dakota winters, the air itself can kill. Donald's body was found in the morning a few yards from the house in which his family had spent the night. There were a number of rumors about what had happened; but whatever actually happened, it was a senseless, tragic death.

I knew the family, so I went to the wake the night before. Following custom, I went to the casket and prayed silently, then I went to the family members and shook hands with each of them. In Dakota Indian country, no words are necessary; a simple handshake expresses one's solidarity with the family in their sorrow. Then I sat down by Willie, one of the cousins.

Sitting down by Willie was an intentional act. Willie is a winka. Jesus in his earthly ministry associated with tax collectors and sinners. As a minister of Christ's church, I should be seen speaking to today's outcasts. My action communicates a message about

God's love.

A winka is a "womanly man." He is a homosexual. He does "woman's work," like sweeping the floor. Traditionally the winka dressed like a woman, but in this day when everyone wears blue jeans and flannel shirts, only his make-up marked him off as different. In traditional Dakota culture the winka had a certain role to play, and was shown respect. But in modern America, the winka is held in contempt.

Willie was holding in his hand a ring - Donald's class ring - a sign of a relationship between Donald and Willie. He asked me to take the ring and place it in the casket. I told Willie I thought he should do that. He was too embarrassed, or shy, or afraid of what others would think, to go forward. I said, "How about if I go up with you." That was O.K. We walked to the casket together. Willie placed the ring beside Donald's hand, touched his hand, said some parting words in Dakota, shed some tears, and then we sat down.

The father of Donald, the deceased, was not at the wake or the funeral, and I knew why. The father had been taught traditional Indian values as a child. His wife's relatives who were winkas were always welcome at his house. Other men in town thought he should kick them out. They thought, if he didn't kick them out, he must be one of them. People can be very cruel. A steady diet of alcohol can remove any inhibitions that might restrain that cruelty. A lie, told often enough, begins to acquire an aura of truth. People started believing that he was something he was not. But as a matter of principle, he could not kick out of his house those who were, in order to prove that he was not.

Donald's father was a gentle man, who could not cope with a world of deceit. The only way he could maintain his sanity, his sobriety and his self-respect was to leave - to leave his home, his wife, and his children, to find a new life in a new community.

Donald's mother was there, filled with grief and guilt. Her short black coat was woefully inadequate for a Dakota winter. Her house and closets were empty. Everything had gone to buy the booze that held her hostage.

The day of the funeral was crisp and clear. The local lay pastor graciously offered to let the white regional minister do the sermon. Though unprepared, he did a great job. He spoke of how Donald had come forward a year before, on his own, and asked to join the church. He told of Donald faithfully affirming faith in Christ and joining the church the previous Spring.

Then we went to the cemetery. The man with the white horse and guitar sang his song. Our thoughts were drawn to a beautiful shore - a better world - a world without the

cruelty and pain of this cold world. The visiting pastor said the appropriate words. Then the designated people with the designated shovels began filling in the grave. After a few minutes others came forward and took the shovels from them. Each took their turn doing this final act of love for their friend and relative. The immediate family stood in a line by the grave, and the tears flowed. Each person, when ready to go, went down the line, shaking the hand of each family member. Again, no words were needed.

Back at the church the traditional meal and give-away was unusually modest because of the family's poverty.

I will never forget that scene, the blue sky above, and blue waters below. I will never forget that song, as clear and crisp as the air we were breathing. They were all pointing to that beautiful shore, so much better than this world below. It will be a world without cruelty, a world without greed. It will be a world where there is neither male nor female nor winka, neither Indian nor white, for those differences will mean nothing in Christ. It will be a world without the booze that destroys peoples's lives to the third and fourth generation. It will be a world where no one is "dysfunctional" - where people talk to each other, where people can trust each other, where people don't manipulate one another. On that beautiful shore we shall meet - husbands and wives, parents and children, and the happiness we shall know there will be greater than the sorrow we have known in this life. Our homes will not be places of brutality and fear, but places of love and peace.

There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar;
For the Father waits over the way,
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

I pray every day, "thy kingdom come." I strive to live as a citizen of that kingdom on that beautiful shore, even while I reside here. Only Christ can bring that kingdom. Come, Lord Jesus, come! Come, Lord Jesus, bring an end to our night. Fill us with your love! Fill us with your Spirit! In faith, we can see your beautiful shore afar. Bring it a little closer, we pray, so we can see it a little better. Come, Lord Jesus!

Death of a Holy Man

As I was walking up the steps of the house where Jimmy Cedar was staying, I heard the wailing begin. Jimmy had been staying with a daughter, lying on a bed in the living room, slowly dying, for a few weeks. He died, just as I was walking up the steps to see him.

Wailing filled the room. Messengers were sent out to tell others. Within an hour, every Indian family in the community came through that door to gaze on Jimmy's lifeless form, and to shed a tear. Every child in the community was brought in, and every babe in arms carried in to see Jimmy as the spirit departed.

When the funeral director arrived, I and several other men carried Jimmy's body in a blanket to the hearse. Then one of the men pulled some sage from his pocket, lit it, said a prayer, and smudged us with the smoke.

Jimmy Sage was a holy man. In the Indian community the word *holy* is associated with the word *power*. People often told the story about one day at a ceremonial dance at the powwow grounds. Thick thunder clouds were moving in from the west, threatening to end the festivities. Jimmy went to the center of the circle and did a dance. The thunderstorm split in two, rain passing to the north and south, but the powwow grounds remained dry. That's *power!* Sacred power.

The wake was the usual all night affair, with every religious group of every description doing their thing to bring comfort to the family. Jimmy was a member of the Congregational (United Church of Christ) Church I served. He was also a member of the Mormon Church. He was also a member of the Native American Church. (He was a very spiritual man). Jimmy's three children each belonged to a different one of those three churches. The family had not told any of us which church they wanted to do the service the next day.

I said to Dora, the Congregational daughter, "You've got to decide who you want to do the service tomorrow. It matters not who you pick; but we all need to know."

The three got into a huddle and talked it over. Then Dora came to me and said, "We've decided. The Mormons will do it."

The next day I arrived for the service about ten minutes early. Dora came over to me and said, "We changed our mind. We want you to do it."

"Fine," I said, "We'll start about five minutes late." I had my Bible along, just in case I needed it. In fifteen minutes I prepared the service, and then led it. At the graveside the Mormons offered prayers, and the Native American Church sang a simple chant, accompanied by a drum.

And so we sent Jimmy on to that realm where there are no churches (*Revelations 21:22*), because God will be our Temple.

LITURGY

May 20, 2001

United Community Church of Cortland, New York

The word "liturgy" I am told means "work of the people." This morning's worship was truly the work of the people.

When I arrived at the church, John was mowing the lawn. "It needed it," he said.

I entered the worship area and saw that everything was neatly arranged and ready for worship—a major transformation from the rummage sale that filled the room yesterday—a transformation that required work from many hands.

I was about half way through practicing my sermon when Bob and Betty walked in. Bob had some things for coffee hour. The men were providing coffee hour after church today. John came in from mowing, washed his hands, and the three of us put the coffee on and prepared and arranged food.

Marina came in with her son Max, bringing the flowers for our service—lilacs and eight red roses. She explained that she brought one rose for each year since her husband's death in a traffic accident. They carefully—I would say prayerfully—arranged the flowers and placed them on the altar. After a little discussion, Mary Louise and Christyann found an appropriate white cloth and placed it on the altar under the flowers.

By then the children were arriving for Sunday School. In the "opening exercises" Sheralyn led them in singing and Betty played the piano. I wasn't there to see which two children received the honor of passing the collection plates. Then it was off to classes. Kim taught one class, Betty another, and I think Melody substituted as teacher in the third class.

I went to the music room for choir practice. Eight of us tuned up our voices and rehearsed the music for the day.

We went to the worship area where Andy handed me the clip-on mike and we adjusted it. We taped for the radio today. Andy handles all the electronic

equipment and will edit the tape and prepare it for broadcast.

Five minutes before the service Christyann-my co-pastor-and the seven other choir members and I went to the next room and joined hands in prayer-then returned to our places. Bob and Dick were handing out programs and cheerfully greeting everyone. I could see that Mildred had placed a glass of water on the pulpit for me.

I could see through the little window into the kitchen that Gary had arrived with melons for our coffee hour.

Marina's prelude was beautiful, as usual. Our choir did our best with an introit. Wendy, our Lay Reader, offered a call to worship, and we all joined together in two familiar songs, and prayed our invocation together.

Then the children came up front, about a dozen of them, and under Sheralyn's direction sang to us about Zaccheus.

Then Joyce, our Moderator, came forward with Betty (this is a different person from the other Betty). I joined them and we went through our service for receiving new members by reaffirmation of faith. Then I offered the greeting of peace, and we had the beautiful chaos as we all went around to greet each other. I'm confident that most of the people made a point of welcoming Betty, but I didn't see, as I snuck out to the kitchen to check on the melons. During this chaos, most of the younger children made their escape to the nursery. I think Joyce (a different Joyce) substituted for the girl who usually watches the nursery.

During the announcements Mary Louise thanked Marie and all the others who helped with the Rummage Sale, reported our profit, and we all clapped our approval.

After Wendy read the Scriptures, Christyann asked for prayer concerns. Several serious concerns were shared, and Christyann lifted them up, with other wider concerns, in prayer.

Our choir offered an Anthem as Dick and Bob passed the plates and all who wished contributed.

After a hymn, I shared a sermon, we sang again, I offered a benediction, and we all joined hands for the closing response.

The coffee hour table was soon moved into place, covered with food, the children enthusiastically reappeared-first in line-and the air was filled with conversation. Visitors were well greeted. Susan packed up the hymnals. Marian and Audrey went to another room to count the money and record everyone's contribution.

After socializing a while, I remembered there was supposed to be a Christian Education meeting after church. I went down the hall and found the meeting. The teachers had carefully examined several curriculum options for next year, discussed them, and made a selection.

I stopped in the kitchen. All the French Breakfast Puffs I brought for coffee hour were gone-I knew they'd be a hit. The container I brought them in was washed, and the kitchen cleaned up.

I left church knowing the door would lock behind me. Al always goes around after church to check all the doors and thermostats.

Liturgy is the work of the people. Our worship this morning was the fruit of the prayerful and thoughtful labors of many, many people.

BELLE'S DANCE

Belle got to church early this Sunday. It was the Sunday before Christmas, a time of year when every child's heart is filled with wonderment and anticipation. This Sunday, Belle was acolyte, a very important job for a 9-year old girl.

Belle's smile greeted each person arriving. She pointed out her new shoes, with mid-size heels, and demonstrated how she could walk on her heels - forward and backwards!

Last night's foot of snow had caused the cancellation of Sunday School; only at 8:00 AM was the decision made to go ahead with church. Silence greeted the handful of worshipers in the sanctuary, in stead of the usual pre-church chatter. The bright sunshine illumined the stories of Jesus in stained glass. It felt like a holy place.

Church can't start until the acolyte does her job. She brings a flame forward on a long acolyte-stick, and lights the candles. Today, Belle had on a silver and black dress with a short cropped jacket. She looked very nice, so did not bother with the acolyte robe. As she walked down the aisle, mesmerized by the flame she held above her head, she must have thought: I wonder what will happen if I just breathe lightly in the direction of the flame? She found out.

Undeterred, Belle returned to the back of the church and got the acolyte stick relit. This time she held her arms up, with the flame high above her head. She swung back and forth, as she shifted her weight from one foot (heel) to the other. Her mind focused on the alter, living totally in the moment, Belle and the flame danced to the alter in joy.

How could she possibly trip, with every adult in the building praying fervently that she not burn the church down? And no grown-up would stop a child so innocently and lovingly approaching the alter of God!

Belle lit the alter candles, then went to the advent wreath. She know her job: light three of the stout cylindrical purple candles now, and the fourth during the advent wreath ceremony. Acolyting requires the proper technique. When a candle has a depression in the center around the wick, the acolyte needs to reach up with the acolyte stick, and twist it around, so the flame reaches down to the wick. Belle performed the task with complete confidence.

Then came the advent wreath ceremony. Pam read some words. On the cue "We light this candle . . ." Belle reached the acolyte stick over to the fourth candle. It didn't

light. Belle did her best to push the flame down in the center. No luck. Pam investigated and exclaimed "there is no wick!"

The Pastor came over, took the candle out of its holder, and discovered a wick on the bottom. Someone had placed the candle upside down! That problem corrected, Belle completed her job.

The pastor announced the offering, and Belle knew her job. She took the offering plates to the center aisle and handed them to the ushers. When they returned, Belle took the plates to the altar as the congregation sang a response and the pastor offered a prayer.

Belle then sat down in the acolyte's chair next to the altar. Several adults told her she could sit in the congregation - it was a different kind of service this Sunday - but she insisted on sitting in the Acolyte's chair.

It was Cantata Sunday - no sermon, just singing. The choir rose and moved to the center of the front of the church. They looked spiffy, all wearing white shirts or blouses and black slacks or skirts. Six men and six women. They had been practicing for this day for two months. They looked out over an almost empty church. About 16 people - mostly relatives - had braved the snow and cold to hear the cantata.

They must have been discouraged, to do all that work and have so few people to hear them. But they began singing with crispness, enthusiasm, and power. No discouragement showed in their voices or faces.

Soren Kierkegaard, a 19th century philosopher, said that we often think of worship as a performance where the congregation is the audience. This is a mistake. Worship is a kind of performance, but God is the audience. The pews may have been empty, but the church was not. God was there. The choir sang for God. They sang their faith. Every heart in attendance was touched, and many eyes were moist, as the choir sang of God's love, offered freely to us.

I left feeling I had truly been to church. The Holy Spirit had touched me - in the joy of Belle's dance - in the faith of the choir - in the message they proclaimed. The Spirit was also there in the congregation, where no one got uptight about an acolyte swinging from heal to heal, an upside down candle, or empty pews. We were there for God, and I believe God chuckled with us over the candle, was pleased with the choir's singing, and touched by Belle's dance.

The following writings were occasioned by the Iraq war.

GOD BLESS AMERICA
by Charles A. Maxfield
Cortland Standard, September 28, 2001

Be careful what you pray for, you might get it.

There is a prayer we see wherever we go. We see it in store windows, flashing in signs along the highway, on bulletin boards, in front of churches and businesses. Some may not think "God bless America" is a prayer. For some it may be an expression of love of country or solidarity in time of crisis. But it is a prayer.

What would it be like if God really did bless America?

One of the most famous blessings ever given was "The Beatitudes," by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. What would it mean to pray "God bless America" in the spirit of "The Beatitudes?" Perhaps something like this:

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

God bless America. Help her to see that she is spiritually poor - that what is most important cannot be acquired with money or gained by her own effort. Help her to see that she needs to be still in the presence of God, to receive true wealth.

Blessed are those who mourn.

God bless America. Through her tears and her sorrow may she find the comfort you intend for her.

Blessed are the meek.

God bless America. Grant her meekness, that she would not bully others, but would seek to serve. Grant her meekness that she would approach all nations and persons in the world with respect, prepared to learn and grow through the gifts of others. Grant her meekness that she might find in love a power greater than any army or missile or bomb.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

God bless America. May she have an insatiable appetite, not for more trinkets and

toys, but a hunger for justice and integrity.

Blessed are the merciful.

God bless America. May she not repay evil with evil, but rather with mercy. May she seek not revenge but reconciliation.

Blessed are the pure in heart.

God bless America. May her motives be pure, uncorrupted by desire for gain or fame or control over other nations.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

God bless America. May she choose the right before the profitable the powerful or the popular.

God does answer prayer and God can work miracles in our midst. May God bless America.

8 October, 2002

Cortland Standard
Cortland, NY

Dear editor,

The efforts to justify a war in Iraq remind me of the old story of the Emperor's new suit of clothes. In that story a couple of men claim to be making new clothing for the Emperor. They go through the motions of spinning, weaving and sewing, but there is nothing there. They are spinning air. No one wants to appear stupid or to offend the Emperor, so everyone goes along with the charade. Until a child declares, "He has no clothes."

Cheney and Rumsfeld have fabricated a justification for a war with Iraq. But there is nothing there-it is made of air. No matter how often or how emphatically they repeat their justifications, the truth hasn't changed. Our Secretary of State makes his protests in private, but as a good soldier obeys his commander-in-chief. The Republicans don't want to be disloyal to their leader. The Democrats don't want to appear unpatriotic, especially at election time. The media are more interested in ratings and sponsors than truth. And we, the people, are confused. We don't see any reason for war, but in our ignorance believe our leaders must know better.

They are all spinning air. There is no reason to go to war with Iraq. Iraq poses no threat to us. There is no link between them and the terrorists who attacked us. There is no evidence that they have weapons of mass destruction. There is nothing to it!

Why does our President insist that we as a nation put our young men and women in harms way, that we offend our allies, that we alienate countries that are helping us track down terrorists, and that we play the role of bully of the world? He is clearly not acting in our nation's interest.

Sincerely,

Dr. Charles A. Maxfield

A TRIP TO NEW YORK

February 15, 2003

My wife, Christyann, and I, went to New York City Saturday to express our opposition to the proposed war in Iraq. It was a worthwhile, and a most unusual day.

We drove three hours to the train station in Beacon, where we met other protestors. One man and his daughter of ten or twelve years were on their way to express a concern for the world that unified them across the generations. Another man talked like a veteran of civil disobedience about tear gas. None of us knew what to expect in New York City, but somehow it didn't seem appropriate to go to a peace rally with a "macho" attitude.

The "march" began as we got off the train and proceeded into Grand Central Station.

We felt somewhat lost in the big city. Our e-mailed directions told us to meet other people from our religious denomination at the Church Center at the United Nations, and then proceed in a group to the rally at 49th Street and First Avenue. When we found a door from Grand Central Station that emerged into daylight I asked a police officer, "Which way is east?" (It was cloudy, so I could not tell direction by the position of the sun). The officer did not know. We asked a few more questions, and were amazed by the officer's remarkable lack of knowledge of the geography of her city, which could have only been intentional. A bystander pointed us east and we began walking.

There were barricades and police officers at every corner, preventing us from going east. Officers told us we had to go north to a certain street before we could go east. When we got there we were told no, go further. Finally we got across to First Avenue. We found the sidewalks barricaded. The authorities had created "pens" in the middle of the street for us. They had mettle barricades, something like the bicycle racks

sometimes found outside public buildings, to which one can chain a bicycle. These bicycle racks were interlocking, creating a corral into which one might herd cattle. It doesn't really give a person the feeling of being in a free society.

We didn't understand what was going on. We gave up on reaching our friends at the Church Center, but did want to get to the rally, which we thought was to be on 49th Street, about five blocks away. In my ignorance I managed to convince a police officer we needed to get to 49th Street, and he allowed us on the sidewalk. When we got to 52d Street we found a bandstand in the middle of the street. This looked like the place for the rally, but was it? After walking a little further, and seeing media vehicles from all over the world, we concluded this was the place. We gratefully found some port-a-potties. Too bad most people couldn't get to them because of the barricades.

We came across some event organizers, who were assembling fourteen large banners, each saying in a different language, "The World says No to War." I offered to help. Christyann started asking questions and taking notes, looking to all the world like a newspaper reporter. Each banner required negotiating with police officers to get it into the crowd. Then we climbed across the bicycle racks into the crowd.

We were among the fortunate ones. In the middle of the first "pen" we could hear about two-thirds of the speakers over the woefully inadequate speaker system. The "pens" stretched back at least twenty blocks to 72d Street. The people further back listened to the addresses and music over portable radios they brought, thanks to event coverage by Democracy Now Radio. As the afternoon wore on, and people left, the police allowed demonstrators to move forward from one pen to another.

We heard an all-star cast of media entertainers, politicians, religious leaders and activists. Any TV network would pay millions of dollars to get that cast on a late night talk show. But when they are free, speaking at a public event for peace, the American networks are mysteriously absent. We heard all of the arguments against war with Iraq, several times. We knew all the reasons ahead of time. We came for inspiration. Desmond

Tutu, South African Archbishop, gave us that inspiration.

After standing in the cold for four hours, we were starting to get hungry. A pizza place on the side of the street sure looked good. I asked a police officer how I could get pizza. He told us to go north to the entrance of our "pen," then south on the sidewalk. But the officers on the sidewalk said no. So we went north to a deli, and split a piece of spinach pie, which was good.

As we walked back to the train station, we had to negotiate with police officers on almost every intersection, who even made it difficult to leave town. Demonstrators were marching up and down the sidewalks on Second Avenue. Of the people we talked to, about half never made it to First Avenue. They had been given a run-around by officers, sending them from street to street, never allowing them through.

I don't know what the city was expecting. This was a peace rally. Peace people are non-violent. Saturday New York City was invaded by a couple hundred thousand people who were polite, courteous, and respectful. Even when challenging the restrictions of the police they were orderly. When walking back to the train station we did come to one intersections where civilians were screaming at police. As we got closer we heard them yell, "We live here!" They were locals trying to go about their lives. A few people go to demonstrations with the ambition of being arrested, and the police sometimes oblige them. But a peaceful spirit pervaded the day in spite of obstacles.

I left with the feeling that the "powers that be" structured the day in such a way that, they hoped, there would be some incident to discredit the peace movement. It didn't happen. The cops on the corners didn't want an incident. They were doing their best to carry out constantly changing orders with an overall mission to keep the peace and control the crowd. As the city reflects on the day, I'm sure everyone will agree they should have let the peace people march. Demonstrators would have a better day; police would have an easier job; locals would have their lives less disrupted; businesses would sell more pizza; and my toes would be warmer.

We came home - in the same train with Pete Saeger - feeling it was a good day. It was a good day to express ourselves for peace. It was a good day to be in solidarity with millions of people around the world, saying *no* to war in Iraq. It was a good day to be part of a mass of people - not particularly well organized - who practiced non-violence in spite of provocation.

Behind the band stand we could see the massive rectangular solid of the United Nations. Here is the hope of our world for peace. Where the League of Nations failed, the UN today must succeed. So far it is succeeding in weaving a course of reason and wisdom between the arrogance of Bush and the tyranny of Hussein. If the peoples of the world demand peace, and the governments of the world through the UN say *NO* to the arrogance of the most powerful nation on earth, we will truly have a new world order.

PATRIOTISM

The day after "nine-eleven" I was driving cross-country from my home in upstate New York to my adult children in North Dakota. Somewhere in Ohio, a man stood on an overpass over the interstate, waving a large American flag. He was stocky, perhaps in his sixties, with a shock of white hair. He must have been strong for the flag he waved was large.

I can imagine what might have motivated that man. He loved his country. His country was ruthlessly attacked. He wanted to do something to express the concern and solidarity that he felt. So he came down to the interstate and waved the flag.

Patriotism is a natural and beautiful passion. Love for our country can move us to pitch-in together to make this a better place for all of us.

Unfortunately evil people will try to use patriotism for their own purposes. Before the dust had settled, our leaders were promoting a war against a country that had nothing to do with our attackers and did not have weapons of mass destruction. Misdirected patriotism was the engine that drove us into that war.

Patriotism is a feeling, but it must be accompanied by thinking. In the name of patriotism we set aside principles for which our country's founders fought and died. Civil rights were curtailed for certain suspects. Torture - clearly illegal - was used. All in the name of patriotism.

Because we love our country, and we love what is right, many of us protested against that war. We marched in our cities and small towns. We wrote letters to the editor and circulated petitions. All to no avail.

I believe it is patriotic to feel shame when our country does shameful things. It is patriotic to exercise our rights to oppose misguided policies.

That man waving the flag over the interstate was patriotic. So were we when we marched against the war. Beware of unthinking patriotism.

Year of Transition

CHICAGO BOG
9 November 2006

Be still

Be still

Tears and joys

leave them behind!

Fears and hopes

leave them behind!

Nightmares and dreams

leave them behind!

Be still

Inhale,

and let the aroma of the leaves overwhelm you.

See the clouds and the blue sky

reflected on the still waters.

Hear the singing of the birds

echoing from the hillside.

Feel the gently breeze

against your skin

And when you have been still for a while,

Then you are ready to rise,

and return to that make-believe world we call civilization.

But carry with you

that stillness

in your heart.

Thoughts on the Approach of My Sixtieth Birthday

Sixty years and counting
the clock in ticking
ticking, ticking.
Beginning of the fourth quarter
so much I have not done
it's now or never
and the clock is ticking,
ticking, ticking.

What does it matter?
How much I accomplish?
How much I experience?
How long the clock
is ticking, ticking, ticking?
Let me live *this* day,
this hour, *this* moment.
Let me live it
in truth and in love.
Let me live today
with all my heart
and all my mind
and all my soul.
Let me live an eternity
in this moment
where no clock is ticking
and I am living, living, living.

GATEKEEPERS

Let me tell you about my visit to Social Services. When my mother went into a nursing home, I had to get her on Medicaid.

I went to the County Office Building, up to the second floor, down the hall, to the metal detector. A short sixty-something man with a large nose and an even larger hat-something like a train conductor's hat-watched me without comment as I emptied my pockets, walked through the detector, then picked up my keys and change purse. Then I entered Social Services.

The County Office Building used to be a school, so the Social Services room is the size of a large school room. One corner has been partitioned off, giving the remainder an "L" shape. I only saw one leg of the "L" as I entered, so it appeared to be a narrow room. To my right were two rows of folding metal chairs, about twelve in all, mostly full. Straight ahead was what looked like two ticket windows, like at an old-fashioned train station.

I walked up to a window. A female clerk pointed to a sign next to the window. "Stand behind the line until a clerk calls you forward." I looked on the floor. A line was painted on the floor, about ten feet from the ticket windows. I dutifully took my place on the free-throw line. After the clerk finished shuffling some papers, she looked up and said, "Next." I proceeded to the ticket window and explained why I was there. She said, "Take a seat, someone will speak to you shortly."

I seated myself on the one unoccupied metal chair. Beside me I met a man who had just gotten off work-third shift-bleary eyed. In front of me was a heavy set young woman with three small children who could not comprehend the concept: "Wait."

After a few minutes the clerk at the ticket window yelled at me, "When the phone on the wall rings, answer it." I looked at the wall, and saw an old-fashioned wall phone there. So I said, "O. K." A little while later the phone rang. I rose to answer it, with the theme from "Mission Impossible" running through my head. A case worker asked me a few questions. I guess I passed the test, because she next came down the hall to speak to me in person.

To get someone on Medicaid, you have to do some homework. You need to get their birth certificate, marriage certificate, three years of bank statements, and assorted other items. You also must complete an incomprehensible application form, most of whose questions do not apply. I made several more trips up to the second floor, through the metal detector, forward to the free-throw line, and to the ticket window, before I was done.

Then I got a letter in the mail, telling me I did not complete the form correctly. They needed the names of everyone who lived at my mother's residence. They provided another form.

I typed out a nice letter, telling them my mother was in a nursing home now. There were a lot of people there. I didn't know who they all were, but perhaps if they called the Home, someone could provide them with the information. I attached this letter to the form, and went down to the county office building, up to the second floor, through the metal detector, to the free-throw line, and forward to the ticket window. The clerk said, "You have to complete a form whenever you submit documentation." I had to fill out a form to submit a form! I simply could not keep a straight face, which surprised the clerk, who could not see the humor in the situation. She pointed to another ticket window, at the end of the other leg of the "L" shaped room. A clerk behind that window, who didn't appear to have much to do, gave me the form to submit when I submit a form.

As I walked to the first ticket window, with the form I was sent, my letter, and the form for submitting a form, I had a fleeting thought: Will I need to fill out another form to accompany the form that accompanies the form and letter? Fortunately, I did not.

On one of my trips to Social Services, as I sat in a metal folding chair, I reflected on the scene. These people are gatekeepers. It's their job to determine who gets in, and who is kept out. Because of budget constraints, they don't want to let too many people in. I wonder if heaven is like this? We have so many stories about Saint Peter at the pearly gates. When we get up to those pearly gates, will we encounter something like Social Services?

* * * * *

It is a strange feeling, walking through the clouds—a light, airy feeling. I walk up to the wall of the heavenly city. The wall is massive, about two stories high, the color of pearls. The gate is about as wide as a football field is long.

In front of the gate is a metal detector. A sixty-something man with a large nose and an even larger conductor's hat keeps watch. I empty my pockets and walk through the detector without incident. When I reach for my keys and change purse, the attendant waves me off, "Won't need 'em no more." (You will have to excuse me. My image of heaven has been shaped by the musical "Carousel" in which all of God's angels are old men with down-east Maine accents).

"You mean," I say, a smile slowly overcoming my face, "I'm in?"

The attendant shakes his head, "If you're goin' thar'" he says lifting his head and looking up, "won't need 'em; and if you're goin' thar'" he says, lowering his eyes and his voice, "won't do ya no good."

The smile evaporates from my face, and anxiety stirs my stomach, as I proceed into the processing room. There is a long line. As I assume everyone is there for the same reason, I get in line. It is a colorful line-up: people of all nations, races and ages: an expression of diversity any college admissions department would envy. The sound of conversation in so many different tongues is beautiful, even though I don't understand a word. I finally get to the front of the line. There is a black line painted on the cloud on which we stand, something like the free throw line on a basketball court. In front of me are eight ticket windows. As soon as one of the clerks at the ticket windows becomes free, she says "Next." I go forward.

"Did you bring your documentation?"

"Documentation? I thought you people knew everything?"

"Not in this department. We only process applications here. We have to determine if you meet our criteria for acceptance. You did tithe, didn't you?"

"Well, eh." I decide it is better not to lie up here; these people have their ways of finding out. It's better to admit nothing.

"I see. Sit over there and someone will speak to you in a few minutes." She points to two rows of metal folding chairs, about twelve in all.

I sit beside an East Indian gentleman who is filling out a form. At the top it says, "Application for Promotion."

"So you people had it right all along, there really is reincarnation."

"No," he replies in his East Indian accent, "This application is only for Hindus and Buddhists. You Christians, you go either up or down. You only get one try."

About then the clerk yells at me, "When the phone on the wall rings, answer it." I look at the wall, and see an old fashioned wall telephone. I twiddle my thumbs for a few minutes. The phone rings. I promptly rise and answer it.

A voice says, "Listen carefully. This phone will self-destruct in twenty seconds.

You are to return to earth. You are to get copies of your baptismal certificate, your church membership certificate, and a statement of your charitable giving for the last three years. You are to prepare a resume listing all the acts of kindness you have ever committed. And record at least three references to your character. Open the compartment at the base of this phone. You will find there special paper for making copies, and a tape recorder for your references."

"How will I do this? People think I'm dead?"

"They will not be able to see you. But avoid crowds. If people feel the air moving as you walk by, you will spook them. The paper and recorder are also invisible. You can go to your funeral and record what people say about you for your references. You can go into any office after hours and make copies on their copy machine. But be careful. Sometimes this invisible paper gets stuck. People on earth think gremlins get into their office equipment. It's only this heavenly paper. If they knew it was your fault-well, you wouldn't want to record that for a reference. Now hurry. Your time is up." The phone clicks. I open the compartment at the base of the phone, remove the paper and recorder, and step back. A confined explosion bursts in front of me, and the phone disappears.

* * * * *

Then I heard a phone ringing and ringing. I opened my eyes, and realized I was still in the Social Services office on earth. I rose to answer the phone on the wall.

I thought: No, heaven is not like this. The real heaven is like the story Jesus told about the return of the Prodigal Son. The father sees his child from a distance, and comes running to meet him, and embraces him, and says, "Welcome home!" When I get to heaven my earthly father and my heavenly father will race to greet me, and embrace me, and say, "Welcome home!" And all the people I have known and loved will be there, and will all embrace me, and say, "Welcome home!"

Now, why can't Social Services be like that?

New Life

PEANUT BUTTER FUDGE COMMUNION

March 11, 2008. Henry's day to come home.

Henry was born on January 11, twelve weeks premature, only one pound twelve ounces. Every one of the sixty days since had been a day of anxiety for parents Brenda and Andy. Getting pregnant had been difficult. Finally, the baby had come. But would it survive? The parents knew of some things that could go wrong, and could only imagine with their fears what other dangers Henry might face. But each day showed progress, as Henry gained weight, and every test came back "normal." Brenda recovered from her surgery, pumped and nursed. Their home was not quite ready for the new arrival, but they spent every spare moment with Henry.

To be a parent is an awesome responsibility. The joy in the father's voice and smile, the glow that enveloped the mother, did not reveal the anxieties inside that said: I don't know how to do this! I want to do everything right; I'm afraid I might make a mistake and ruin Henry.

I'm Henry's Grandpa, Andy's Dad. I came to see my family, and brought along my special friend Connie, to meet my family. Twenty-seven years before, Connie had a preemie ten weeks early. Connie had been talking to Brenda, as a big sister might, sharing experiences and feelings and giving reassurance. The night before, when Andy and I entered the hospital room, Brenda and Connie were seated on the day bed, their eyes filled with tears. "What's wrong?" we asked. "There's just too much love in the world," Connie replied. Brenda explained, "We're so filled with awe at the wonder of it all."

On this day, Brenda and Andy and Henry had a full schedule of pre-departure consultations. Connie and I were on our way to see my other son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. I'd made a pan of peanut butter fudge to take to them. After the Doctor left the room, having assured them, "Control is an illusion," we had time to share. Andy turned on the video camera and I read a poem I had written. It thanked God for the miracle of this new life, and also thanked the doctors, nurses, and everyone else who cared so much for Henry. They were all God's miracle workers. Andy turned off the camera. We all cried, because we all felt deeply the gratitude to God and to so many caring people doing their jobs with love in their hearts. We all hugged.

After we settled down, Andy asked about the fudge. I told him it was for his brother's family, but we could each have a piece. I passed the pan and we each took a piece and ate.

I am a minister. I don't know how many hundreds of times I have taken bread, broken it, and passed it around. We call it communion. When we do this we sense that we are one. One with God. One with the Universe. Old or young, rich or poor, male or female, we experience a sense of unity in the sharing of the bread. On this day peanut butter fudge was our communion. We were one: One in our love for Henry; One in our love for each other; One in a profound sense of gratitude for the wonder of life.

Reflections on the Reading of the Passion Narrative
at Gwynedd Friends Meeting on Easter Sunday, 2008

The Story communicates reality to us more effectively than conceptual or theoretical language. Through *The Story* I understand the real world in which I live.

When I see pictures of Abu Ghraib, or other scenes of humiliation, I remember how the soldiers treated Jesus. I remember *The Story*.

When I avoid conflict, when I don't get involved, I remember how Pilate washed his hands. I remember *The Story*.

When I don't stand up for what I believe, either denying it or being silent, I remember how the cock crowed and Peter wept. I remember *The Story*.

When the absence of God weighs heavily on me, I remember how Jesus cried, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me!" I remember *The Story*.

When everything is lost, and I have given up, and then I see the sky growing lighter, and a new day coming, I remember Easter morning. I remember *The Story*.

It is through *The Story* that I see the world as it is.

It is through *The Story* that I see life's meaning.

It is in *The Story* that I live.

It is *my story*.

Notes on Our Honeymoon in Nova Scotia

"I came here to have fun, not to die!"

I looked at the steep decline of the bicycle path ahead of me, the loose gravel surface, and the drop off of several hundred feet to the ocean on the right. I dismounted and walked my bike down the hill.

I'm not afraid to die - in the ultimate sense. I am at peace with God. I believe "the Lord is my shepherd" in this life and the next. I have lived a full and meaningful life. Since Connie and I fell in love, I have known more joy than any person deserves to know in this life. My life is complete.

Our wedding had a "It's a wonderful life" aspect to it. All those wonderful people who have been part of our lives! They have shaped us, and we have shaped them. Our lives have made a difference!

I learned to ride a bicycle at the age of 62, when Connie and I began dating. It was a terrifying experience, to me, and to the pedestrians who happened to be on the same path. But I've learned to enjoy it and it really is fun now. Thanks to Connie, I've recovered a part of childhood that I missed.

But I don't have to keep up with Connie, whose been biking all her life. I came here to have fun, not to die. I'm not afraid to die, but I'm not in a hurry, either. My life is wonderful and I cherish each new day I am given.

Fear is a wonderful thing. There are many people alive today, who wouldn't be, if it weren't for fear. I want to be one of those people.

LANSDALE FARMERS' MARKET

Some people work for the money,
 We would like money, too.
 But if we had to work without passion.
 what good would the money do?

We do what we love
 we love what we do;
 It gives us pleasure
 to sell this to you.

[voice 1] I make soap
 without allergens
 With beautiful scents
 for women and men.

[voice 2] The herbs we grow,
 we grow by hand,
 To help preserve
 life on the land.

We do what we love
 we love what we do;
 It gives us pleasure
 to sell this to you.

[voice 3] The only way of life I've known,
 is working on the land,
 From childhood till I will grow old,
 so come up to my stand.

[voice 4] I ran the rat-race long enough,
 a better way I've found.
 In peace I tend my garden now,
 my soil is holy ground.

We do what we love
 we love what we do;
 It gives us pleasure
 to sell this to you.

Reflections at silent retreat, 11 Dec 2010
 Myth: A story that frames our view of reality.

We were brought up on Superman and Mighty Mouse,
 the Lone Ranger and Tonto.
 There was no mystery so mysterious,
 no problem so difficult
 they couldn't solve it
 in thirty minutes or airtime.
 "Leave it to Beaver" and "Father Knows Best"
 discovered some new wisdom in each thirty minute episode.

We were brought up on a myth - the myth of success.
 We thought: This is the way life is supposed to be
 Not in thirty minutes, but in a lifetime,
 We would right the wrongs,
 discover the wisdom,
 and everything would be all right.

We didn't tell ourselves often enough the Jesus myth:
 The God who suffers and dies,
 who shares our burdens and sorrows.
 Perhaps the resurrection sounds like the ultimate happy ending.
 But what does the resurrection mean
 If we haven't walked the dusty roads with Jesus,
 Prayed in the Garden with Jesus
 "If it be your will, let this cup pass from me,"
 Felt the pain of the cross with Jesus
 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."

The Jesus myth has been lived out more often than the other -
 Martin in Memphis
 Jack in Dallas
 Bobbie in L.A.
 Oscar in San Salvador
 and on and on and on . . .
 Where's the resurrection?

Where's the "Well King, this case is closed"?

Jesus rose from the dead
But the Sadducees still ran the Temple,
The Pharisees still bound people to a law,
The Romans still ran the country,
The tax collectors and soldiers still did whatever they willed.

The resurrection wasn't the happy ending
of Superman and Mighty Mouse,
the Lone Ranger and Tonto.
The resurrection life is not about success.
It must be about something else.
That old myth - the one we saw on TV every Saturday morning -
That old myth doesn't work.

If we really throw it away
and live by the myth of Jesus
what will life look like?

Thoughts on My 65th Birthday

Today marks my completion of what our society considers the active life. If I were ever asked to give a commencement address to young people starting out, I would not tell them the usual lies about how you can be whatever you want to be. What would I say?

Greet each new day as a special gift of Love--Avery & Marsh

None of us is born with a right to a certain number of years; each day is a precious gift.

None of us can avoid pain and suffering. These are part of our human experience. If we are fully alive we will feel deeply. If we are not willing to embrace our feelings of sorrow, neither will we be able to embrace joy.

We are not all created equal. Some are born with money, others have good looks, others have intelligence, some receive love in their childhood that empowers them to live with self-esteem. Whatever our gifts, we can use them to make this world a better place. Better to use whatever we have than to envy in others what we lack.

When we start out in life we think we know where we are going, but we don't. We will keep on growing. we will have new insights, new dreams. Sometimes defeat will set us in a different course that is better than the old one.

We need to believe in something. Belief is not opinion. Our beliefs are at the very core of what defines us as a person. Our belief is the centerboard or keel that keeps our ship afloat in spite of the storm. Our faith/belief is constant and steady. Yet, if that belief is a relationship with a person (God), it will evolve and grow through time.

There is no sense in going through life saying "are we there yet?" We are here - right now - feeling alive - fully present to the world and prepared to receive any blessing that might come our way.

Reflections on Fugitive Slaves buried at Upper Dublin Friends Meeting

*Oh freedom, Oh freedom!
 Oh freedom over me.
 And before I'd be a slave
 I'll be buried in my grave
 and go home to my Lord
 and be free!*

They were born free;
 for no one made in the image of God is born a slave.
 They were enslaved.
 But they knew there was something deep within them
 that had to be free.

And so they ran!
 They left behind them
 the whip and the lash
 the "yes sir," and "no sir"
 the bowed head and downcast eyes
 the fear and humiliation.

They left it behind.
 They walked
 and they ran
 and they waded
 and they swam
 through the woods
 in the dark of night.

That something within them that had to be free
 that something within them
 drove them on.

To a farmhouse in Pennsylvania they came,
free men and women
 and they could go no further.
 They died

free men and women
and free they will be
for eternity.

*And before I'd be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
and go home to my Lord
and be free!*

This is Freedom Ground.
We don't know their names.
We don't know their number.
We do know the deep yearnings
 that brought them to this place:
That something within the human soul
 that comes from God and returns to God,
 that must be free.

We remember their suffering and humiliation.
But more important,
we remember their courage,
their human dignity.
We honor that something within
that cannot be made a slave
on this Freedom Ground.

LOOKING FOR THE CHURCH IN THE NETHERLANDS
Reflections on my 2014 visit to Leiden, Netherlands

Pieterskerk: There is a plaque on the wall to honor John Robinson, the pastor of the congregation we call "Pilgrims," who worshiped in this part of Leiden, Netherlands, before coming to America. Robinson is buried here, under one of the many stones that make up the floor of this building.

We go in. The space is enormous - the ceiling far above. It is a grandiose structure, but it is empty. There is no longer a congregation that worships here. They call Pieterskerk a church, but it is not a church. Bricks and mortar do not make a church; neither does a beautiful organ; dead bones under the stones, and a glorious history do not make a church. Where is the community of believers? Where the faith? Where the struggle to live the faith in our world? I am filled with sadness. The Holy Spirit has left. The building is empty.

On Sunday we attend the Walloon Church in Leiden - a church of the French Reformed tradition. Some of my ancestors worshiped in this community before affiliating with Robinson's church and coming to America.

There is no name on the door to tell you it is a church. The front is covered with scaffolding for renovation. I had telephoned the night before to make sure this was the right place.

The people are friendly, and give us a bulletin and the two hymn books we will need for the service. While their sanctuary is being renovated they meet for worship in the smaller "coffee room." The room contains chairs in rows, with a table in front, and a pulpit in one corner. About thirty people gather for worship, of many racial complexions and all ages.

The service is conducted in the French language, but most of human communications is non-verbal. We sense the warmth of the welcome, how people get along well with each other, the directness and clarity of the sermon delivered by the female pastor with only a few notes, and when the people begin to sing, we can feel the faith.

This congregation, and my congregation in Pennsylvania, come from a common source - the Reformed tradition. We have each evolved from that source, retaining those aspects we found valuable, and changing others to address a changing world. In some cases we have changed in similar ways, in others we differ. I sense a unity of faith: a unity that crosses geographical and linguistic boundaries; also a unity that crosses four centuries. Tears of joy fill my eyes. I have come home.

Tout le monde est bienvenue

Tout te monde est bienvenue

That's what the poster said on the door of La Eglise Réformé du Bouclier in Strasbourg, France.

"Everyone is welcome."

I was surprised when my wife, Connie, said the sign brought tears to her eyes. We often say those words so glibly. But somehow, those words, at that moment, touched Connie's heart.

Perhaps it was relief at finally finding our destination after a morning of detours and wrong turns, and confusion in the rabbit-warren of streets in downtown Strasbourg. Perhaps it was a warm feeling in seeing a sign one could easily translate in a land of a different tongue and different customs.

Perhaps it was more.

Perhaps it was reflection on a lifelong journey, remembering churches that did not make one feel welcome, and a god that demanded perfection, and consequently assured rejection. Perhaps it was remembering a journey away from God, and then finding God again - a God and a community where everyone was welcome. Perhaps it was soothing oil on a troubled heart. After church fights, experiencing alienation where one once experienced grace. The sign was a reminder of what church has been and is meant to be: a place of acceptance and unconditional love.

Tout le monde est bienvenue.

The following Sunday we attended Friends Meeting across the river in Kuhl, Germany. There was no sign on the door, but we felt the warmth of the welcome.

Connie and I, and her folks, doubled the size of the congregation, which met in a home in a residential neighborhood.

After about thirty minutes of silence, the clerk of meeting spoke. He expressed concern over the treatment of refugees in Europe. He recalled that Jesus, as a boy, was a refugee in Egypt. He repeated the words of Jesus in the parable of the last judgment, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

A few minutes later I felt called to share a message. It went something like this:

Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." WE are the refugees. Jesus Christ is our refuge. He is our strength, our security, our hope. When we experience this, we will know how to welcome the other kind of refugee.

Tout le monde est bienvenue - Everyone is welcome. Those words can become too "nice," too polite. They express the very heart of the gospel. When we say them, let us remember all the pain and losses in our lives, all the rejection and isolation. Let us flee to the arms of the God who would embrace us. Let us feel again the joy of an island of acceptance in a world of alienation. Those words should bring tears to our eyes.

REFLECTIONS ON ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE
March 9, 2011, St Johns United Church of Christ, Lansdale, PA

"All gone," Emma said.
The little girl in the pew behind me,
her mother exasperated
by a little girl's chatter
and wiggles and wandering in church.
"All gone," she said
in the silence after we had confessed our sins.
I don't know what was in that little girl's mind,
I don't know what "all" she was referring to
and I don't know where it went.
But she said, "All gone."
And God says "All gone,"
with the simplicity and directness of a two-year old.
All your sins -
All gone.
All the things that make you
feel not good enough -
All gone.
All the guilt you feel
for the things you did you shouldn't have done
and the things you didn't do you should have done -
All gone.
God loves you
even when you wiggle and wander and chatter in church,
Emma knows -
It's all gone.