

YOU, NEIGHBOR GOD

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You, Neighbor God —

Whither shall I go from your spirit?

or whither shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there also!

If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there shall your hand lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me . . .

(when my own right hand is incapacitated)!

(Psalm 139:7-10)

In the summer of 1970, George and I took the wings of the morning and sojourned on another continent for two months. I'm not sure that Sigtuna, in Sweden, where Suzanne Wicks and we represented Illinois Yearly Meeting at the triennial meeting of the Friends World Committee, can be termed the "uttermost parts of the sea," but we felt something of what David was trying to express in his psalm in our experience of different landscapes, languages, cultures. And two hospitalizations—one last fall with a serious illness, and one this summer with a broken arm after being knocked down and robbed on the street near our home—have given me a glimpse of what it is like to "make one's bed in hell." (No slurs on either hospital intended!) I want to bear witness to the truth that David expressed: that God cannot be hidden from, and to the truth that David implied: that all life is inter-related.

Thus, I have been on a long journey, and if, as Dag Hammarskjöld tells us, "the longest journey is the journey inward . . .,"¹ I have indeed covered a tremendous distance. I want to share something of that journey, letting the outward journey illustrate and (I hope) illuminate the inner one.

It was our first trip to Europe, and we decided to spend not just the one week in Sigtuna, but to travel in Northern Europe the whole summer. It was the fullest and perhaps the most intense two months of our lives. We were greedy, wanting to see and experience as much as we could.

Everything beckoned to us to perceive it, murmured at every turn: remember me!²

Cathedrals, art galleries, historic places, pre-historic places like Stonehenge,
different faces, different races
different names, and different games,
different ways to eat and drink, to speak and think,

reunions with friends after long separations, new friends with shared values,
Friends Meetings in different languages: minds and hearts, to say nothing of legs,
were stretched almost to the breaking point. Some nights I came to sleep, saying
to myself, I can't absorb it all now; I'll have to think about it later.

*A day we passed, too busy to receive it, may yet unlock
us all its treasury.²*

Unexpectedly, unplanned, the chance came for thinking about it. Within a
month of our return from Europe, I was suddenly sicker than I've ever been and
felt for awhile that I might be coming to the end of my earthly journey. A long
wait to get into the hospital—finally graduating from “urgent” to “emergency”
status—a longer period in the hospital, and an even longer convalescence at home
provided times of solitude for remembering and internalizing the summer's
journey, as well as for travelling back in time through my own half century's
search for meaning in life—for God, if you will.

At such a time, one can only place himself in God's hands, with something
akin to Dag Hammarskjöld's affirmation:

*For all that has been—thanks!
For all that is to come—yes!*

As strength began to return, I felt the need to set my house in order against the
day when time does in truth run out for me: to set my house in order literally,
so that my children will not be faced with a messy house and the messy ends of
a life that was not ordered and orderly, and figuratively, to live whatever time is
allotted to me, so far as in me lies, at peace with all men and with the universe of
which I am a part. I also felt a need to set down on paper something of my
spiritual journey, the search for the source of my being. This is the first
installment.

1.

Our last Sunday in Europe we worshipped with Munich Friends in a bilingual
meeting. After a pot luck lunch we journeyed to the East and arrived in time to
worship Monday evening with Erna Lowenberg and the small group of Friends in
Vienna.

With our summer now drawing to an end, Erna asked me what I saw as the
main difference between Europe and the United States. I didn't have to stop to
think: it is the sense of history pervading Europe, which we Americans have to a
much less degree. Take any European city (almost any will do, regardless of
country, size, or fame), and you can find evidence that life has gone on
continuously in this place for hundreds of years. You can probably find ruins
dating back to the Roman invasion or to pre-Christian times. Each succeeding
century has left its contribution, and even ordinary people in the streets are
aware of their roots and proud of their heritage.

Here we tear down historic or architectural landmarks, or good sound
housing, to make way for bigger, taller boxes which will produce more income.
And we have been incredibly short-sighted and careless with our natural
resources. In Chicago, we've been involved at times in trying to save masterpieces
by Frank Lloyd Wright. More recently a gem by Louis Sullivan is being
demolished. At times we've tried, not always successfully, to save trees and
precious lake front from superhighways, radar installations, and an incon-
veniently located convention hall.

In Europe the past seemed to reach out, extend into, and continue vital in the
present. “The dead hand of the past,” some Europeans said, when I tried to
discuss it with them. To them America seemed like the land of opportunity
because it *was* free of the weight of the past. But looking at my country from
the distance of another continent, I came to feel strongly that our government
needs urgently to learn some lessons from history—our own revolutionary
history, as well as world history.

European cathedrals are concentrations of this sense of history. They were
built slowly over centuries and are full of artistic details made by loving hands,
humble or famous. In almost every one we saw, something from our own
century was being or had already been added. For example, midway in our week
in Sigtuna, Friends were taken by bus some thirty miles north to the ancient city
of Uppsala. In small groups with English speaking guides we walked through the
most beautiful, well cared for cathedral where Swedish kings are still crowned.
As we entered, to our right the tomb of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 to 1772)
was pointed out. Going on around, wall paintings and sculpture from various
centuries were identified. The building itself was begun in the late 1200's, but
only completed and dedicated in 1453. The spires collapsed in a fire in 1702 and
their rebuilding not finished for nearly two centuries. As we came out to the
entrance again, on the opposite side from Swedenborg's tomb, we stopped
before a very modern piece of metal sculpture, representing the globe of the
world with a cross driven deep into it. It was a memorial by the Swedish people
to the memory of Martin Luther King. Good Quakers though we were, I think
all of us American Friends purchased and lit the little white candles to place on
this particular altar.

Sometimes a man is too big for his century, and something of his presence
clings to the places where he lived and which he loved. Who among us did not
feel the presence of Dag Hammarskjöld later that day when we stood silently
before his grave, and of the great botanist, Linnaeus, as we stopped at his
summer home, on the way back to Sigtuna.

Looking back on my own search for God, I found myself comparing it to
building a cathedral. One's faith, one's concept of God, grows slowly through a
lifetime, with a basic edifice altered, enlarged, remodeled as one's experience
deepens. Illuminated moments add stained glass windows; encounters with
poetry, music, art may add details of beauty.

*We are all workmen: prentice, journeyman, or master,
building You—you towering nave . . .⁴*

In childhood I erected a fairly simple structure and lived within it comfortably. I say "lived within it" because as a child I practiced the presence of God much more continuously than I have been able to achieve as an adult. My maternal grandfather was an eloquent hell-fire-and-damnation Methodist preacher and the only thing I ever wanted to be when I grew up was "a preacher like my grandpa." How early this began I'm not sure, but it was definite by the time I was seven. I was not to be deflected by various "male chauvinists" who told me the ministry was not for women and tried to persuade me to be a missionary or to go into religious education. I was sure of my call to preach; I knew the Lord had laid his hand on me. I was sure the way would be open. I began to prepare myself for my calling, reading the Bible from cover to cover, training my voice, eventually majoring in Greek in college so that I might read the New Testament, and finally going on to graduate work in theology. The pageantry, ritual, and music of liturgical worship had great meaning for me for many years. As we wandered through cathedrals in every country in Europe we visited, I had a sense of my own past, as well as of the long past of each uniquely beautiful edifice.

II.

*Who can compute our harvest? Who can bar us from the former years, the long-departed?*²

One of the most vivid encounters with the living past was set up for me by Erna Lowenberg. Vienna, along with the rest of the world, was celebrating the two hundredth year of the birth of Ludwig von Beethoven. The city hall in Vienna had one of the most comprehensive and beautiful exhibits I have ever seen, covering the entire sweep of Beethoven's life. Moreover, we spent all afternoon on a Beethoven bus, visiting the various places he had lived in and around Vienna and learning details of his life. He moved often; the neighbors were always complaining about the noise. I had been reading about him all year and working on a Beethoven sonata, trying to make my hands reproduce as accurately as I could the music in his mind. All the pupils of the man with whom I study piano—children and adults, voice as well as piano—had been learning something by Beethoven that year, and in June we pooled what we had learned in a memorable memorial concert.

If I'm to judge from the faces of the people on that bus and at that exhibit, the turbulent, impetuous, unconquerable spirit of Beethoven was a living presence to us all. And yet by the end of his life, every personal relationship had turned sour, and his deafness walled him off from virtually all human communication. In silence and in solitude he struggled to set down on paper the specifications for the music within him whose mighty architecture—like a vast cathedral—would overarch the centuries and reach to the very gates of heaven. I've seen a bumper sticker in Chicago which I covet for our car. It says, "Beethoven lives!"

But that day in Vienna was not the only one when I felt Beethoven's presence. There was a lesser encounter in Bonn, his birthplace, when I reached my hand out to touch reverently his piano, to find a uniformed guard materializing as if out of the woodwork to admonish me in clipped German. And between Munich and Vienna there was another experience in which a number of

strands of my life came together.

At the Munich meeting we met Heinz von Tucher, who had travelled a long distance by train and bus to be present. He lived close to the Austrian border, and since we were enroute to Vienna, we agreed to drive him home to spare him the long return trip by public transportation, since he had recently had a long hospital stay. We found our travelling companion had excellent English and was a fascinating conversationalist. We learned, for instance, that he came from a very old family; his ancestors had commissioned portraits by Albrecht Durer five hundred years ago. One of these portraits appears on the 20 Deutsche mark. His wife is Danish and they had met at Woodbrooke and spent twenty years working in India for the British Friends Service Council. Somewhere he had encountered Marshall Hodgson and identified us as coming from the same Meeting. His four married children live in four countries: Germany, England, Australia, and the United States.

His wife had not gone to Meeting that day because a daughter and a daughter-in-law, each with three children, were visiting and another daughter with two more children was expected the next day. I'm sure Karen von Tucher must have groaned inwardly when she saw her husband coming home at supertime with two more people, but she greeted us warmly while mentally counting the beds. I hope she was relieved that we insisted on sleeping in our camper. The daughter-in-law turned out to be from Glen Ellyn, Illinois, of all places. Her husband had studied theology in Chicago and is now working on a doctorate at the University of Tübingen.

The first thing I saw in the house as we came in was a Steinway grand piano and a volume of Beethoven sonatas open on it. I had been away from a piano for many weeks and asked if I might play, and Beethoven was, of course, on my mind and in my fingers. Afterwards, Heinz played for me—some of his own compositions!

As we talked at supper of their long experience in India, we found another major interest in common: a long, deep interest in Gandhi. For the first major alteration in my cathedral was the knocking out of a wall to make way for a large addition the summer I was fifteen. It was then I first heard of a frail Hindu lawyer, a Christlike man who was not a Christian. Avidly I read everything I could find about him. I became convinced God had entrusted his message for the twentieth century to this man. I still believe that. At this time I made the central commitment of my life: to non-violence as a way of life. My public speaking career began in earnest in high school and continued in college with a constantly growing and updated speech on Gandhi, for as he hit the headlines, people wanted to know more about him, and high school and college speakers' bureaus provided me with a channel. Gandhi illuminated for me the life and death of Jesus and made concrete and contemporary his teachings.

*We are all workmen: prentice, journeyman, or master, building You—you towering nave. And sometimes there will come to us a grave wayfarer, who like a radiance thrills the souls of all our hundred artisans, as tremb-lingly he shows us a new skill. . . .*⁴

In like manner Gandhi came into my life.

III.

We camped one night at Ulm in southern Germany and though of Albert Einstein who had been born there. The roof came off my childhood cathedral when I began to encounter the concept of relativity in college and realized that my basic structure was too small to contain the God of the vast reaches of space.

But it was not Einstein who blew the roof off, for I found reading him rough going. One afternoon in the stacks of the library I took down a slender volume with a blue cover by the British astronomer, A. S. Eddington, entitled "Space, Time and Relativity." I read it in one gulp. The universe has never been the same for me since.

This summer, reading a new biography of Einstein, I found this: "Einstein's God appears as the physical world itself, with its infinitely marvelous structure operating at atomic level with the beauty of a craftsman's wristwatch, and at stellar level with the majesty of a massive cyclotron."⁵

*We climb up on the rocking scaffolding;
the hammers in our hands swing heavily;
The hammerstrokes sound, multitudinous
and through the mountains echoes blast on blast.*

Only at dusk we yield You up at last:

*And slow your shaping contours down on us:
God, You are vast!*⁴

The first Sunday I attended 57th Street Meeting, I picked up in the literature rack a small pamphlet put out by General Conference called, "To the Scientifically Minded." It was signed by a group of distinguished Quaker scholars, including two founding members of 57th Street Meeting. It was there I learned that Arthur S. Eddington was a Friend. At the World Conference in 1967 I found myself in a worship-sharing group with Doris Eddington and told her how her brother-in-law's book had changed the earth and changed the sky for me. She remembered this when I saw her again at Sigtuna.

IV.

It remained for graduate work in theology at the University of Chicago to help me begin to conceptualize God in terms of the scientific world I had discovered in college. My new theology had its roots in the philosophical ideas of Alfred North Whitehead. His rough and ready definition still seems viable to me: "God is the binding element of the world."⁶

God is the force that keeps solar systems in far reaches of space swinging around their suns and held together as a whole. God is the force that keeps the tiny solar systems in atoms held together in incredibly numerous varieties to make up the familiar furniture of our world. God is the force that holds atoms, molecules, cells together so that they work in mutual interdependence to produce ever more complicated forms and activities. How beautiful is the mutual cooperation and interdependence of cells and processes that holds together a flowering crabapple tree . . . an Irish setter . . . a human child . . .

At the level of society, the binding element called God is attempting to achieve a mutual interdependence in which all men can be glad and wise, to borrow a phrase from Clifford Bax's great hymn. If this is not yet realized, it

means there is work for us to do. We can make a contribution to the binding process in our time. After all, there was a time in the history of the universe when the binding process had not yet achieved a crabapple tree, much less a child of the human species. It's going to take time to achieve the kingdom of God, the brotherhood of man.

*And this is the weaving of human living,
of whose fabric each individual is a part;
each is intimately connected with the bottom
and the extremest reach of time,
and not one of these persons
is ever quite to be duplicated nor replaced,
but each is a new and incommunicably tender life,
wounded in every breath, sustaining, for a while,
without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe.*⁷

James Agee wrote those words in his book about tenant farmers called "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." Sensitive photographs by Walker Evans illustrate the text. I read it in the hospital.

Paul Tillich suggests⁸ that each of us must look into the depths of his being and recognize there our dependence on some ultimate source for life and meaning and human good, and this ultimate depth we can name God. I look at my own experience, my life and the world around me, and perceive that there is a process at work in me, as in the world, making for increasing community, interdependence. As I give myself to it, consciously turning to it for guidance in the decisions of my life, I find meaning, and the means of making life with all its frustrations and problems bearable—nay, even triumphant and joyful in the fact of one's personal death.

There is at least one important way in which God conceived of as integrative process differs from the traditional Christian God and that is in the attribute of omnipotence. God is limited by the process set in motion; He cannot set aside the process nor alter the chain of cause and effect. Our life depends on the orderliness of the universe. It is arrogance and self delusion to believe God can be bribed with prayers and incantations, with tearing of hair and wearing of sackcloth and ashes. We must fulfill conditions within ourselves before the miracle can take place. God cannot do it alone.

Perhaps in the end Jesus was suggesting that God is not omnipotent when he compared him to a father. What earthly father would allow children to be burned with napalm in the jungles of Vietnam and not rescue them if it were within his power? What kind of father would permit his children to die in concentration camps, or by assassins' bullets, or of starvation and pestilence, if he could "pass a miracle" and save them? Sometimes human fathers cannot feed their children, due to famine, or widespread unemployment, or prejudice. Human fathers cannot prevent accidents or disease. The loving normal father does all he can to protect his children and to teach them to take care of themselves. How great his anguish is when he cannot protect or provide. How great must be the anguish of God in the face of the suffering of his children. He is dependent on us to help minimize suffering and violence and agony. He cannot do it alone.

V.

I had another experience of the inter-relatedness of life in Europe, this time in Rotterdam. In 1948 we were involved in the leadership of an international student seminar of the American Friends Service Committee all summer in Woodstock, Illinois.

Among our students was a beautiful girl from the Netherlands who was spending two years in the United States as an exchange student. Marietta Tels was twenty that summer. Over a score of years we've kept in touch with her and others from that memorable summer and we looked forward to seeing her, twenty-two years later, in her own home in Rotterdam.

After her studies here, she returned home, finished her university training and went to law school, finally marrying a brilliant, charming (to say nothing of good looking) fellow student. Their respective grandfathers had known each other while both were sitting on the Supreme Court of the Netherlands. To Lex and Marietta were born three children: two boys now in their teens—good looking, bright, all one could ask for—and a daughter, Saskia, whose life started out in equally promising fashion. When she was five, Saskia was severely ill with meningitis and not expected to live. She did recover, however, and came home after a long hospitalization. Slowly it dawned on Marietta that her daughter was now retarded, and for a long time Lex could not accept it. Not only was it impossible for the child to learn normally, she was wild, uncontrollable, miserably unhappy, a problem to her family.

Finally the painful decision had to be made to place her in a residential school for retarded children founded by Rudolph Steiner. (A month later in Sigtuna, we who had not heard of Rudolph Steiner before our Dutch friends told us of him, had a reunion with Dan Marsten, classmate of our children at Scattergood School and long time member of Illinois Yearly Meeting, who is now working at a Steiner school in England and had recently visited the Dutch school where Saskia is.)

In the long loneliness that followed Saskia's leaving home, Marietta decided to return to serious study of the piano. She had not taken lessons since she was a girl and had recently inherited a beautiful grand piano from her grandmother. So, likewise, Elizabeth Watson, after an automobile accident in 1964 in which a daughter had lost her life, had been studying piano seriously after many years away from it. She, too, had acquired a beautiful grand piano at this time, through her mother. Marietta and I were only vaguely aware from our letters that in each case piano study had been therapy for grief, but now, face to face, we spoke of it.

I stood in that living room in Rotterdam looking over the music piled on the piano with an uncanny feeling of looking in a mirror. Here was the same edition of Beethoven sonatas as mine, with my sonata fingered and analyzed in pencil, much as mine was, back in Chicago; here was the same German edition of Mozart sonatas, Grieg's Lyric Pieces. Moreover, here were the same exercise books: "Der Kleine Pischna," Hanon, Czerny Etudes. We compared notes and found that each was studying with a man who had in turn studied with someone who two generations back had studied with the great Polish pedagogue, Theodor Leschetizky, who in turn had studied with Carl Czerny, who in turn had studied with Beethoven himself.

At a time when the foundations of our personal worlds had been shaken, music, and Beethoven's in particular, had brought meaning and healing to each of us. Beethoven was alive and well and living in Rotterdam that day.

I would not want to leave you with the impression that the past was more compelling than the present in Europe—far from it. We were only incidentally sightseers—we were primarily visiting friends (and Friends) and our itinerary was arranged around their schedules. I have spoken at length of our experiences with the von Tuchers and Marietta. Almost without exception we found our friends at some turning point in their lives—for good or ill—and they were amazingly open to us. One young couple had just moved into a new house and were expecting their first child. A couple about our age, newly married, had actually put off their honeymoon till after our visit; we drove them out to the small hotel in the mountains. One family was unexpectedly burying the grandmother the day we arrived. A friend, recently retired as head of a school she had founded, spoke to us of the sweeping changes her successor, her son, was making. A former colleague of George's put off entering the hospital for the final stages of cancer that he might share his last weekend at home with us. He entered the hospital the day we left, lapsed into a coma in a few days and died before we returned to Chicago. In Lubuck, we stood by the joint grave of the parents of our three German foster daughters and silently thanked them for the great gift of their beautiful girls who had given us so much joy and fulfillment after the loss of one of our own daughters.

Finally, our last weekend in Europe, with Erna, we came to sense something of the terrible loneliness of the refugee—uprooted from her home, but always with some roots still unsevered in the original soil, transplanted to another country and culture, putting forth roots in the new soil, and eventually returning in retirement to her original home. Always the divided soul, the epitome of the suffering of millions of refugees in this twentieth century. Dear, dear Erna.

How deeply people took us into their lives and shared their hopes, griefs, doubts, fears, joys. We travelled more than miles and kilometers. We made the journey from birth to death in concentrated form, the events of our own lives mirrored in our friends.

*What have we learned from living since we started except to find in others what we are?*²

VI.

At some unspecified time I became aware of a river flowing through my cathedral grounds—the clear stream of mysticism in which time past and time future come together in the Eternal Now, and God is not sought outside, because we know beyond intellectual argument that we are part of God, that he is the sum total of all the members of creation, down to and including the basic rock, water, and space of our universe. We know what Kenneth Boulding calls "the burning oneness binding everything."⁹

Midway in my training for the ministry I found my cathedral with one side pushed out to accommodate Gandhi, the roof blown off by Einstein and Eddington, and myself worshipping more comfortably outside. As an assignment for a class studying various forms of Christian worship, I visited 57th Street Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends one Sunday—and knew that I had come home at last.

Here the various parts of my faith, and my life as well, came together. The founder of the Society of Friends was no male chauvinist—perhaps because early in his ministry he met that remarkable woman, Margaret Fell. No longer was I a second-class citizen in a male profession. New, unexpected ways to follow my calling were waiting for me. Non-violence was assumed; Gandhi was an old “friend of the Friends.” And one did not join on the basis of a creed or a set of beliefs; one committed oneself to a search for God, for truth, in one’s own experience, in company of a group of seekers. Such a fellowship of seekers could nourish the spirit of an A. S. Eddington, a Warder Clyde Allee, and Edgar Anderson. And finally, silent worship is pure mysticism.

Add to all this the fact that I, one of ten women in a seminary with a hundred very eligible men, had somehow fallen in love with a doctoral candidate in political science, and I hadn’t quite figured how I was going to fit a professional career in the ministry into his academic career! Our membership in the Society of Friends, coming almost simultaneously with our wedding, has underlain our third of a century together.

We wanted to make a pilgrimage while we were in Europe. We crossed over from the continent by hovercraft to the southern tip of England’s green and pleasant land,¹⁰ drove west to London, then to Stonehenge and cathedrals at Salisbury and Wells, up through the dark satanic mills of the midland industrial cities (pausing at Birmingham to visit Woodbrooke), and on north to the vast stretches of the fells, with their wide vistas and strange outcroppings, like Pendle Hill.

Here we were accompanied by a long-haired shaggy man in a home made leather suit who had walked these back roads three hundred years ago, talking to people, seeking some encounter with God. Finally in 1652 he had his great opening on Pendle Hill, the insight that God could be known directly in one’s own experience, that he is “the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9). And he found “a great people waiting to be gathered,” as he recorded in his Journal.

We walked the footpath to Swarthmore Hall and thought we might have caught a glimpse of Judge Fell’s wife, standing in the door way, watching the unkempt, itinerant George Fox approaching her beautiful, well ordered home, and sensing intuitively that this man held the answer to her own search for God, and so opening her heart as well as her home to him.

We marvelled that this man (“an original, being no man’s copy,” as William Penn said of him in his introduction to Fox’s Journal) should have given voice to a truth so deep and basic that it could not become outmoded, so vital that it could not only nourish the first generation of Quakers and sustain their witness of truth to power in prisons and places of execution, but could still revitalize each succeeding generation and sustain them in witnesses appropriate to their times.

We pushed open the doors of tiny old meeting houses at Preston Patrick, at Brigflatts, and knew we belonged here, rather than in the massive cathedrals. We sat together silently on the plain benches, sensing something of the experience of the valiant group of early Friends hearing Fox speak, as recorded by Francis Howgill: “The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us, and catch us all, as in a net.”¹¹

I have spoken so fully of the past and present in Europe that I will pass over the future rather quickly, but do not think we were unaware of it. We were camping all summer in camp grounds full of young people from many countries, iron curtain as well as free world. All summer we wore our peace symbols and were rewarded by smiles and waves of recognition; it was the universal password. I have great hope for the world. I think young people see things much more clearly than their elders, no matter how annoying their forms of protest may seem to the establishment. And I have great hope for our Society. Its future is in good hands. How often at Sigtuna some young friend cut through the thinly veiled allusions to financial considerations and tradition for tradition’s sake to the heart of a matter under discussion, confronting us in our middle-class comfortableness with the real state of the world. To paraphrase Sydney Carter’s song:

In their old faded blue jeans and their shaggy, shaggy locks they are walking in the glory of the Light, like Fox.

VII.

After such a summer, how good to come home! It felt like this:

*What have we learned from living, since we started . . .
except to re-ignite commonplace?
O house, O meadow slope, O setting sun,
your features form into a face, you run,
you cling to us, returning our embrace.*²

And so it was: Dear Carol! Dear house and garden! Dear dog! Dear grimy Chicago! Dear inter-racial neighborhood! Dear 57th Street Meeting! What joy to be home! Surely this was going to be one of the best years of my life. With energy I started on a new job . . .

But it was not to be. During the interminable nights of my illness, too sick to sleep, too sick to read, I hung on to these lines:

*You, neighbor God, if sometimes in the night
I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so
only because I seldom hear you breathe
and know you are alone,
and should you need a drink, no one is there
to reach it to you, groping in the dark.
Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.
I am quite near . . .*¹²

This strange inversion of our usual conception intrigued me: as if God were the pneumonia patient, struggling to breathe, groping in the dark for a drink . . . During those nights I was not given a miraculous intervention in my illness, though at times in desperation I prayed for it. Rather I found a sharing of my struggle to breathe, and courage to keep pushing the diaphragm in and out by will power.

One night of depression, caused in part by medication, I cried for hours. A black nurse's aide on a routine check found me crying. She sat down on the foot of my bed and said, "You've been lying here worrying about your problems. Don't tell me about them—I've got enough of my own. But let me tell you something. There's no one in this hospital tonight, patient or staff, who doesn't have problems too big for them. And whatever *your* problems are, there are people here with a lot bigger ones." I realized then that Neighbor God was not only suffering from pneumonia in my room, but from many things in many rooms. The nurse's aide was right: my problems were not so big after all.

*One space spreads through all creatures equally: inner-world space . . .*²

and suffering is one component of everyman's inner world. It is the badge of our membership in the human race. It is the lot of all.

*. . . each is a new and incommunicably tender life, wounded in every breath, sustaining for a while, without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe.*⁶

I learned to set things in perspective. After all, as the doctor reminded me, pneumonia is still one of the top ten killers in this country: I'm not the only one to have it, and I did in time recover. And a broken arm inflicted on me by two young neighbors was a relatively small and short-term inconvenience and discomfort compared to what white people have done to black people for centuries in this country.

Nor were we singled out for grief. It, too, is the lot of all, ultimately. We are not the only ones, even in Illinois Yearly Meeting, to lose a young daughter in an automobile accident. After our accident seven years ago we were sustained by the great outpouring of love and caring of our friends. But we also mingled our grief with that of David who cried out, "O Absalom, my son, would God that I had died for thee" (II Samuel 18:33), and with others who left the record of their grief in music, drama, sculpture, poetry, as well as with the numberless less gifted souls who nevertheless suffered just as poignantly and intensely throughout the farthest reaches of time on this planet. Finiteness is the lot of all living things.

When I finally made it into the hospital with pneumonia, I was sick enough to be given a private room. How fortunate was I that the one available turned out to be on an upper floor with a window that looked out across Lincoln Park, with the trees turning color and blue Lake Michigan stretching to the horizon. The first few days people kept asking if I didn't want television, and I kept saying no, with emphasis, but they never quite believed me. Finally they mounted an empty television box on the wall bracket so it would look like I had TV. Who would want to be dulled with medocrity when the mighty drama of the change of seasons was taking place and one unexpectedly had a ring side seat? I was so much in need of harvesting the fruit of my intense summer, and with this unexpected interruption in my life's pattern, I could also participate in the year's harvest of beauty outside my window.

In the mystic's world, inner-world space is not merely shared with other human beings, but with every member of creation.

Birds quietly flying go

*flying through us. O, I that want to grow, the tree I see outside is growing in me.*²

I wanted so much to grow, to get well again!

You, neighbor birds, neighbor trees, neighbor lake, neighbor stars; You, neighbor nurse's aide sitting on my bed; You, neighbor God, storming my soul in such many-splendored ways: how manifold, how marvelous, how excellent are Your works!

Out of the same basic elements we are all made, each of us connected genetically to the farthest reaches of time, each of us a bundle of processes tenuously held together for a brief time, subject to all the enormous assaults of the universe—to pain, grief, beauty, fear, anxiety, tension, joy, hatred, love—incredibly vulnerable to accident, disease, old age. And yet each one unique, infinitely precious, never to be duplicated. No two snowflakes, grains of sand, human beings identical!

In the face of the odds against any of us surviving as individuals more than a few decades, how frantic seems our pursuit of security, money, possessions. For there is no hiding place down here and you can't take it with you! There is no security but the inner certainty that one is part of something that did not begin with one's birth and will not end with one's death. How we bear the assaults of the universe, how we reach out of our seeming separateness in love and compassion and tenderness to other members of creation, changes for better or worse, to a greater or less degree, the character of the whole stream of life. There is no security except the love we give and the love we receive.

I have a house within when I need care;

I have a guard within when I need rest: the love that I have had.

Upon my breast

*the beauty of the world clings, weeping there.*²

Weeping? Weeping in collective grief, pain, finiteness, yes—and joy!

In one sense, each one of us builds within himself his cathedral, or his meeting house, throughout his life. In another sense, each of us helps God to grow. Perhaps for those of us who hold that God cannot be confined in a "steeplehouse," another simile is needed:

Whoever you are, go out into the evening,

leaving your room, of which you know each bit;

Your house is the last before the infinite,

whoever you are.

Then with eyes that wearily

scarce lift themselves from the worn-out doorstep,

slowly raise a shadowy black tree

and fix it on the sky, slender, alone.

And you have made the world,

and it shall grow and ripen

as a word, unspoken still.

*When you have grasped its meaning with your will, tenderly your eyes will let it go.*¹³

The tree will outlive us. Its shade, its fruit or nuts, its flowers and leaves, the beauty of its bare boughs in winter, its wood when it finally falls, will bless the world long after our names are forgotten. We need not be anxious:

to live in mankind is far more than to live in a name. 14

VIII.

Almost a hundred years ago, in 1875, Rainer Maria Rilke was born in Prague. When he was ten, his father sent him to military school, but he had neither the physical stamina nor the inner inclination to be a soldier, and he was sent home. Then his father tried business training, but he had no aptitude or desire for that, either. He attended the University of Prague for awhile, but eventually dropped out of that, too. Like college dropouts today, like George Fox, he became a wanderer, and remained one most of his life, writing most of his poetry as a guest in other peoples' homes. Early in his wanderings he made two trips to Russia, meeting Tolstoi, and feeling a kinship with him and others he met there. Out of the religious experience of these years came a slender volume of poems, called *The Book of Hours*. The poem, "You, Neighbor God," and the cathedral poem, "We are all Workmen," are from this group.

In 1902 he went to Paris, drawn by his interest in the sculptor, August Rodin, and his philosophy of art. He married one of Rodin's pupils, and wrote a book on him. He served for awhile as Rodin's secretary. He is best known for the poetry which is the fruit of this period of his life—several volumes of highly polished, exquisite small poems, many having their roots in a particular piece of sculpture or architecture. The poem, "Whoever You Are," was written in 1902, at the beginning of this period.

He was still living mainly in France at the outbreak of the first world war, and as a German national found himself unwelcome and unsafe. In the summer of 1914 he crossed into Germany and stayed in Munich for awhile. He was heartsick at the war which separated him arbitrarily from those whom he loved and respected and which seemed so meaningless. He was finally able to go to neutral Switzerland where he lived the rest of his life, dying of leukemia at the age of 51.

In August 1914, in Munich, Rilke wrote a poem which has seemed to illuminate the period of my life through which I have been passing. The lines have been imbedded in what I have said, without identification.

Now let me leave you with the poem, without my personal commentary:

*Everything beckons to us to perceive it,
murmurs at every turn: Remember me!
A day we passed, too busy to receive it,
will yet unlock us all its treasury.*

*Who shall compute our harvest? Who shall bar
us from the former years, the long-departed?
What have we learned from living since we started,
except to find in others what we are?*

Except to re-ignite commonplace?

*O house, O meadow-slope, O setting sun!
Your features form into a face, you run,
you cling to us, returning our embrace!*

*One space spreads through all creatures equally—
inner-world-space. Birds quietly flying go
flying through us. O, I that want to grow,
the tree I look outside at grows in me!*

*I have a house within when I need care,
I have a guard within when I need rest,
the love that I have had! Upon my breast
the beauty of the world clings, weeping there.*

—translated by J. B. Leishman

*Es winkt zu Fuhlung fast aus allen Dingen,
aus jeder Wendung weht es her: Gedenk!
Ein Tag, an dem wir fremd voruberbringen,
entschliesst im künftigen sich zum Geschenk.*

*Wer rechnet unseren Ertrag? Wer trennt
uns von den alten, den vergangenen Jahren?
Was haben wir seit Anneginn erfahren,
als dass sich eins im anderen erkennt?*

*Als das an uns Gleichgultiges erwarmt?
O Hausg o Wiesenhang, o M9endlicht,
auf einmal bringst du's beinah zum Gesicht
und stehst an uns, umarmend und umarmt.*

*Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum:
Weltinnenraum. Die Vogel fliegen still
durch uns hindurch. O, der ich wachsen will
ich seh hinaus, und in mir wachst der Baum.*

*Ich Sorge mich, und in mir steht das Haus.
Ich hute mich, und in mir ist die Hut.
Geliebter, der ich wurde: an mir ruht
der schonen Schopfung Bild und weint sich aus.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Munich, August-September 1914

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p.58.
- ² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Poems 1906-1926*, trans. J. B. Leishman (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), p.193.
- ³ Hammarskjöld, *ibid.*, p.89.
- ⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Poems from the Book of Hours*, trans. Babette Deutsch (New York: New Directions, 1941), p.29.
- ⁵ Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times*, (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1971), p.19.
- ⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, p. 158. (Now available in paperback.)
- ⁷ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1941), Ballantine Walden Edition, pp.53-54.
- ⁸ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp.52-63.
- ⁹ Kenneth Boulding, *There is a Spirit: The Nayler Sonnets*, (Nyack, New York: Fellowship Publications, 1945), from Sonnet 1, p.1.
- ¹⁰ Borrowing phrases from William Blake's poem, Milton ("And did those feet . . .").
- ¹¹ Elfrida Vipont Foulds, *Let Your Lives Speak*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 71, May 1953, p.7.
- ¹² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Poems from the Book of Hours*, p.13.
- ¹³ Rilke, *Selected Poems*, with English translations by C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1966), p.21.
- ¹⁴ Vachel Lindsay, "The Eagle that is Forgotten," in *Selected Poems of Vachel Lindsay*, (New York: Collier Book, 1967), p.131.