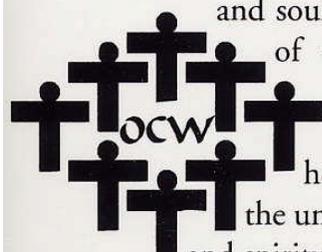


IN ANY GIVEN MOMENT

A personal narrative of the struggles, joys, passions,
and soul work experienced in the pilgrimage
of the St. Dismas Community of the
Order of Christian Workers...a jour-
ney in AIDS, addictions, recovery,
homelessness, poverty, sanctuary...and
the underlying pilgrimage of personal growth
and spiritual meaning in an intentional, inclusive
gathering of outcasts and just folks...



THOMAS L. JACKSON, M.DIV., PH.D.

In Any Given Moment

Copyright © 2002 by Thomas L. Jackson

Library of Congress Number

ISBN # Softcover 1-4010-5375-0

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This book was printed in the United States of America

Books by the Author

Go Back, You Didn't Say May I: Thirtieth Anniversary Edition

Moments of Clarity

Moments of Clarity, Volume II

Moments of Clarity, Volume III

In Any Given Moment

Me & Us

Life's Secrets

Life's Secrets, Part II

STOP! Before You Kiss That Frog.... [humor]

For

Sr. Patricia Maria Magdalena,

who showed up first, has stayed the longest, has likely worked the hardest...and loved beyond measure.

And for

Our fellow Companions—throughout the world—who have traveled this journey with us in wondrous, supportive ways;

Our Resident-Companions and Community-Companions—all of those who have come and gone, to continue their journey in a different way...or come and stayed, to gift us with their solidarity—yet all who have mutually taught and learned with us so many of the lessons we need to reanimate each day;

Our Servant-Leaders— Sr. Jane Frances de Chantal, Br. Gregory Francis de Sales, Fr. River Damien, Br. Michael Simon, Br. Tobias Joseph, Sr. Andrea Margaret, Sr. Cindy Angela de Foligno, Sr. Carla Therese Lisieux, Sr. Mary Joseph, Sr. Elise Marguerite, Br. Charles Sezze...as well as those “fellow-travelers” who have, over these years, given their hearts: Laurie, Barb & Charlie, Leo, Carol, Robert, Paul, Margaret, and Sandy;

“Mother Mary” for her investment of heart and soul in the initial—and continuing—crazy dream...

PREFACE

Although this personal narrative is a continuation of the journey as described in *Go Back, You Didn't Say May I*, it is, in fact, an entity unto itself. It portrays a certain place, a certain people, during a certain time, under certain circumstances. Yet the “certainty” of it all is likely mitigated by my own perceptions, for this is *my version* of the reality of that place, that people, that time, those circumstances. There were—and are—literally hundreds, perhaps thousands, of *other* eyes and ears and voices attuned to these experiences, and I hope that I’ve honored those; that is my intent.

While I describe these moments and these characters from real life in a real place, I am quite sure that our struggles and joys in our bittersweet world are reasonably “universal”—that the reader will recognize his or her own pilgrimage through time and soul, through the kaleidoscopic, roller-coaster experiences of living on the face of the earth. Yes, I believe that we are called to share our stories with one another in this often-ambiguous universe, for our stories may allow us—as we say—to make some sense out of the nonsense.

Knowing, too, that ours is simply one of many communities across this land which are risking and learning in a solidarity of intentional community work and/or ministry—as well as those which seek greater understanding of the unique teachings of the Nazarene—I have included an after-section entitled “Resources,” which may be of help in surveying the perspective of others, through websites, books, and periodicals. We have learned much from many over these decades of dialogue.

Finally, let me thank you for treading this pilgrimage with us in these pages, as you accompany us just as we are—as you are—“warts and all.” We hope to encourage you in continuing your own quest in any way we can—perhaps through our website, perhaps in a copy of our poster, perhaps in a mutual and common commitment to foster inclusive community wherever we are.

Namaste,
Fr. Tom Jackson
Abbot
Order of Christian Workers
www.OrderOfChristianWorkers.org

TRUST

[from German *trost*, consolation]

I sit with Father Dave on the front porch of Andre House in Phoenix. It's an early-December noontime, and we sit side-by-side in the pleasant climate, both staring straight into the street of this poor, urban neighborhood, each with personal thoughts of the day's obligations, yet both aware of my pending departure.

[As I stare, I think of Thomas Merton's prayer: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so...Therefore, I will trust you...though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.]

It's been many months of working together amid the organized chaos of this place: the daily feeding of hundreds and hundreds of homeless folks, the construction work on the new (former warehouse) building, the staff meetings, the sharing groups, the backyard Eucharists. And now a time of struggling—somehow—with needed, bittersweet farewells.

I showed up in May from Birmingham, from years as a shrink/priest, to try to discover again my interrupted journey to the streets, to identify with an intentional community of strangers, to be a non-Catholic in a Catholic, Holy Cross community...to wander among priests and monks and full-time volunteers and part-time volunteers and the desperately poor folks of this abundant desert land...to not pretend that I am anything other than a fellow pilgrim, somewhat lost in my own journey, but perhaps newly-found in a place of real vocation.

I showed up, too, not only unannounced, but somewhat in disguise: no indication of religious or professional "credentials" or many words of background or spiritual expectations; rather, I simply presented myself as a carpenter who had heard that they needed some help in renovating a huge building into a headquarters for their work and ministry. The original folks I met seemed awfully glad to hear that I was a carpenter, and few other questions were asked of me. I was to discover that their enthusiasm for my presence was due to an almost complete absence of other carpenters. Oh my, I hadn't expected *that!*

I showed up to work...and *work* I did, mainly alone, in those stifling hot days of the urban Phoenix summer. As days turned into weeks, my aloneness—my "secret" of my past and my intent—evaporated into the welcoming of community, as kind questions became answers, as carpentry joined with shared tasks beyond my supposed lack of expectation, as strangers became coworkers, as "non-Catholic" became seemingly mundane in a world of common cause.

My history—in clinical work, in community-building, in group training, in recovery-work, in previous street-work—became more and more confessed in intimate discussions, and suddenly I was asked to help try to forge a more evident process of group awareness...in other words, to establish times and environments in which folks could pursue the intentional act of sharing their lives by simply "sitting" together in mutual dialogue. And so, that happened. Co-workers began to discover their common journey, their differences, their fears and hopes, their self-imposed shame of imperfection, their daily joys, frustrations, and dreams. And even as "convener" in most

of these sittings, I was gifted with the realization that I, too, was no longer a stranger to them or myself, but a fellow, intimate pilgrim.

In late November, in the beauty of an innocent question asked in a casual sitting together, one of the group members wondered aloud when it would be that I would celebrate a Mass in the community. And, instantly, I knew that the situation had suddenly changed in ways that I wanted to deny, for I knew that the institutional line between Catholic and non-Catholic had somehow disappeared in our life together, yet—however wonderfully-appropriate that might seem in terms of our life together—it likely meant institutional difficulty for these religious whom I had come to love and need. In that kind, pregnant moment, I knew instantly that it was time for me to consider my next way-station on the journey, wondering where on earth I might go; wondering if I had the courage to set off in a direction that had no pre-established, formed community awaiting me; wondering, in my classic Virgo-like tendencies, *exactly* what it might look like, feel like, be like.

So I sit, in easy and uneasy silence, with Fr. Dave on the front porch.

[There had been that quick trip through Tyler, Texas, to visit my mother, my sister Barb, my brother-in-law Charlie; though they seem to love it there as transplanted Yankees from Michigan, I cannot seem to get a comfortable sense of it. There is a feeling of foreignness. Yet I was invited to a party by some of their friends, met a lot of good folks, talked about my experiences in Phoenix, felt relaxed, had a good time. One woman, especially, seemed very interested in what I was presently doing, and later asked if I would consider coming to Tyler to pursue a similar effort; I blithely cast off that possibility as something beyond imagination...and likely appeared elitist and arrogant as I did so. On my drive back to Phoenix, I rehearsed all the reasons why I would not want to live in East Texas, but there was that gnawing beckoning of living with and near beloved family-members after all these years of long-distance relationship, of quick, periodic visits; present, too, was that seductive thought of having folks I knew nearby as I ventured into a risky proposition. But, no, I can't quite imagine myself in Tyler...even as I wonder who would have me elsewhere.]

Fr. Dave finally breaks the silence: “Do you know where you’re going next?”

“No.”

More silence.

“Any clues or hints?”

Pause. “Well, someone in Tyler, Texas—you know, where some of my family lives—suggested that I might find a ministry there. If that’s what I really want to do....”

Longer pause, and I continue with a semi-grin on my face, “Of course, I think Tyler, Texas, is the last place on earth I want to live.”

“Why’s that?”

“Oh, you know...it seems to be so “foreign” to everything I *think* I am! Cowboys...conservative...not very urban...unknown to me...I don’t know....”

“Sounds like it’s a bit scary to you.”

“Yeah, maybe. Maybe it feels like too much of a risk, too set up for failure, unlikely for what I think I can do.”

“Last place on earth you want to go, huh?”

“Yup.”

Long silence.

He turns to me, waits to catch my glance, smiles: “Guess that’s where you need to go then... right?”

“Yeah, dammit,” I offer abruptly, surprising even myself, wishing I could swallow the words back into my throat.

Silence.

“I’m really going to miss you, Tom.”

I tear up and swallow hard. “Well, I’m taking you folks with me in my heart.”

We stand and embrace, and I give him a kiss on the cheek. And we go back to work.

DOOR

[from Old English *duru*, an opening]

I open the front door of this house at 1601 N. Bois d'Arc in the 'hood of Tyler, Texas, on May 9th ; with the door wide open, I shout into the front yard and the street, "WE'RE HERE!" and I pause for a moment to be sure there is no response, and then I close the door.

I laugh at myself: there is no "we"...I'm here *alone*; and, of course, no one's going to respond because no one in the neighborhood quite knows that I'm "here." Folks on the block only know that this fiftyish white guy's been banging away at this brick house, tearing things out, carrying things in, and they wonder, I'm sure, what his angle is.

[I remember reading Charles Penniman's words: "(We) are not fit to deal with the poor...we must spend at least two years just listening to and learning the neighborhood. And when you see that you aren't bringing God to anybody, but that God is already present and active in the neighborhood, then you might have the humility to serve these people."]

As I seek patience, I impatiently wonder to myself if I learned enough about community-building in my time with Scott Peck. Or enough about woundedness and healing during my time with John Lee. Or enough about the spiritual life during my time with Richard Rohr. Or enough about commitment and courage during my time with Dan Berrigan. Or enough about me during my time with me. I wonder if I'm enough.

[I found that my "desert experience" came after I left the desert: I had forty-four days of almost unabated solitude as I worked on renovating ...solitude broken on certain occasions (such as "officiating" at a wonderful wedding in Alabama on May 1st for dear Jerry and Ada) but, on the whole, the days were consistently 16-hour marathons of carpentry, cleaning, painting, plumbing, etc., with no fellow-workers or companions...or noise from radios, TV...no news reports, newspapers, or magazines...simply the sound of my own world. It was an invigorating, wonderful, and sometimes scary experience: days of loneliness, days of contentment, days of calm...late, late evenings of sipping some instant coffee while sitting in the midst of the material chaos...sometimes hearing noises that weren't there, sometimes feeling desperate for another human voice, sometimes talking out loud to disinterested walls and floors...sometimes periods of great elation when I accomplished a task, having used a skill I thought was long forgotten...sometimes waves of anger and/or depression when no one was there to hold the other end of a board...or, worse still: no one there to acknowledge my ego needs for affirmation of something I had finished; the times when I went to hardwares or lumberyards or plumbing suppliers—or simply stopped by my relatives' house for a short visit—I felt somehow "different," as if I had entered an alien world of which I was not a part. There were times when I think I was on the verge of hallucinating...almost wanted to...and something inside of me pulled me further and further into the solitude...and I found it important to live as basically as I could, until it would somehow be "over," and I would know that I had come through something...that I was on the other side of where I started...and so, for much of the time of those forty-odd days, I ate only cereal and diet soda, and with all of the work and sweat—together with the machinations of my inner-self—I could feel the weight falling off me, of work-clothes feeling looser and looser, of a soul feeling leaner...but, still, I didn't even want to know exactly what was happening

with that...only to know that I could “get through” this process, that I could acknowledge my own work, my own emotions, my own elation, my own despair...that I could review hundreds—no, thousands, it seemed—of previous relationships one-by-one, and know what they were about, what I had gained and lost, knowing for the first time in my entire life that there was no gaining or losing, but simply growing and changing and learning the same ten basics of life over and over and over again...and, somehow, it all seemed to make sense to me the more it seemed to be nonsense. By Grace, in the thundering, demanding, healing silence of day after day, I realized that I have tried to give much of myself (however imperfectly) to many in all of these years...realizing, too, how much I’ve received from so many in all of these years...and that there is a balance to all of it, which meant—and means—that I am a profoundly lucky, fortunate man, full of craziness and blessings which could not even be numbered in that seemingly-endless desert time. And so? And so...I know better than ever before what Grace is all about (which means that I know nothing...thank God!)...and so I know that I live in a house in a “poor, dangerous” area, and yet the dangers are really, mainly, inside of me, rather than in my new neighbors...and so I know that I do not want to go back into that deep solitude very soon, for I have come back to a “social” world again...and yet...and yet, I know that the solitude—once experienced to such depths—is now very nearby for me, available for the beckoning if I so choose. And that is a comfort. As I occasionally allow myself to nap in the shade of Grace, I’ve discover ten thousand things; as I awake, I search again for One Thing.]

I hope to listen to this place and to this neighborhood.

I hope to celebrate Mass, in my own words, even if alone.

I hope that the neighborhood will put up with my strangeness, my unknowing, my presence.

I hope to name this whatever-it-is “The Order of Christian Workers.”

I hope that it will be a non-denominational, ecumenical, spiritual, charitable, inclusive community of diverse, wounded, healing pilgrims.

I hope that we will call ourselves Companions.

I hope to be known only as “Fr. Tom”—simple, identifiable...for better or worse.

I hope this becomes sacred ground to those who are told that they are unworthy to stand on sacred ground, to have this sacred ground known as “St. Dismas House”—named after the criminal who, by legend, was crucified along with the Nazarene...and the only person in all of the New Testament to be promised “Paradise.” I hope that I—and future pilgrims—will know that we are all criminals and all saints.

I hope that we will form *chaburah* (“ha-voo-rah”), that wondrous Aramaic word from Jesus’ day which meant “a company of friends.”

Wow, that’s a mouthful of hope!

I don’t know what I will live on...but I pray it will become obvious, even to these old and blind eyes.

I don’t know where I will start...so maybe I won’t “start.”

I don’t know where companions will come from...but I pray they will come.

I once asked a contemplative nun, “How does one start a monastery?” She didn’t hesitate with her answer, “You find a place, make it safe, and welcome the saints as they join you.” What I forgot to ask her was, “Then what?”

Impatiently, I pray for patience.

POSTER

[derived from Latin *positum*, to place, to present]

In the many hours of my aloneness—and, I admit it, impatience—I began designing a poster, which I’m titling *To Follow the Christ*. It’s not that I know anything more than anyone else does about that process, but I wanted to put into words some of the moments of Grace I perceive when I’m actually awake to Grace. So I cut-and-pasted, a word at a time, at my sister’s dining room table, and decided to include all sorts of things from my head and heart, along with a menagerie of type-styles and festive, bright colors. Just to “protect it” as ours, I’ve put a copyright on it, and used some of my last dollars to have a thousand copies printed—perhaps we can use it to give courage to others...and certainly to remind us of our hopes.

Well, honestly, to remind *me*.

This is what I put in the poster, to remind *me*:

WAKE UP

Perceive love

Get rich by becoming poor

Take risks

Forge community incessantly

Play

Question Dogma

Expect the unexpected

Find the Christ within you

Let go

Welcome Feelings

Take your own spiritual inventory, letting others deal with theirs

Nourish the Earth

Untie resentments

Offer blessings

Sing (even off key)

Embrace your shadow

Follow the Christ

Confess your vulnerability

Celebrate

Gift yourself with quiet contemplation

Accept your universal family...all equal, all loved

Pray, by listening

Love yourself...*really*...and your neighbor

Follow the Christ

Delight in other faiths, noticing the connecting threads

Enjoy your sexuality

Remember that everyone has their story

Look into the eyes of children, finding yourself

Laugh uproariously

Grieve openly

Follow your heart

Share, rather than compete
Create beauty
Eat with crazy friends...and enemies
Be a spendthrift with compassion
Liberate your priorities
Just be
Follow the Christ
Excavate joy
Study scripture, not worship it
Wash feet
Consider death as a gentle birth
Establish sacred places anywhere, everywhere
Feed the hungry, clothe the naked
Commit random acts of kindness
Disdain seeking permission
Lean toward balance
Acknowledge the Divine in your soul
Stand in an enemy's shoes
Avoid labels and confining roles
Follow the Christ
Live on the edges of respectability
Be holy (wholly), not holier-than-thou
Cherish someone
Personify the Good News
Consider the lilies of the field
Resurrect
Live passionately
Follow the Christ
Heal
Squander charity
Receive Grace
Make things new
Visit a prisoner
Live simply
Refuse war
Grin
Review absolutes
Be a servant not a sermon
Follow the Christ
Seek justice
Eschew idolatry
Acquire courage
Wander
Melt swords into ploughshares
Allow
Reach out to others in all sorts of embarrassing ways

Marvel

Continue the Journey, wherever you are, a step at a time
Follow the Christ...

GRACE

[from Latin *gratia*, favor]

Perhaps the conversations in lumber yards and hardware stores...or the chance meeting of folks on the street...or by timely introductions to folks in various churches have offered the means, but by Grace, word-of-mouth seems to be saying that this is a safe place, a place of hospitality...and so I am visited by those with HIV/AIDS, those who are being hassled by landlords, those who want to make suggestions as to what this ministry might be, those who simply want to be a part of something which might make Grace more obvious in their lives...

By Grace, I have met many new acquaintances...several to become friends and Companions in the future, I know; some are “churched”—crazy Episcopalians, Disciples, Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians, Buddhists...and even a few crazier Catholics! Many more are “unchurched” or the walking wounded from many “organized religions,” most wondering simply why I have moved to this area/neighborhood...or why this priest has a ponytail.

By Grace, the “we” has become true: my companion and friend, Tricia, from Phoenix, has arrived—also penniless—to join this work; she is a hard-working, wondrous soul, full of vitality and hope. As a small group of family witnessed the sacred act, I blessed her as “Sister Patricia Maria Magdalena” of the Order of Christian Workers, and I wondered during those moments if her mind was reeling from the outrageous journey from the world of high-finance, high-salary life insurance to the sudden demands of being a nun on the streets of the ‘hood. All I know is that “Sr. Maria” is a new, priceless gift in this new world.

By Grace, *we* were delivered a new, “used” lawn by my landscaping brother-in-law, a lawn which had to be removed from another site, and ended up green and immaculate on this terribly needy lot! Charlie continues to offer us advice and consolation, even when we plant a donated shrub where we want it, rather than where it would certainly look better!

By Grace, the young man who delivered the lumber said that he wanted to help with anything...and his day off is Saturday...and just give him a call...

By Grace, I had the good sense to pull my car over and park for a few minutes as I saw some children in the next block playing one day: these eight kids, ages five to eight (I would guess), were involved in an exuberant, free-for-all football game, with much hilarity and joy—and the “ball” was actually an empty two-liter soda bottle—and they allowed me to realize again that, even in their “poverty,” they were using much more creativity than with any wonder-toy they could have received from Toys-R-Us.

By Grace, traffic prevented me from confronting the driver of the pickup truck in front of me one evening, a truck which declared on opposite bumper-stickers: “Jesus is my Friend” and “Warning—You Burn the Flag and I’ll Burn You!”

By Grace—if I am willing to stay awake to Grace, even as I nap in its shade—I will know each morning and each evening that everything and anything I will ever need is already here.

AUTHORITY

[from Latin *augere*, create]

As things have moved so swiftly in these past weeks, as we've started to have "Sharing Groups" and "Gatherings" so that folks might share their lives and hopes and needs, I have been reminded of the reality of the Church, of the boundaries set, of the limitations on what we "may" do or not do, of fear of relationships within the institution, of the big- and small-print that some would impose on this new work and ministry; in other words, there are those "religious" folks both here and other places who are starting to ask by what "authority" we do what we are trying to do...with, of course, the *sotto voce* of implied threat. These are not "bad" people, but simply folks who want the absolute control of institutional behaviors...yet I wonder what this portends for the "open meals" and "free healing" on which the Nazarene based his work and ministry.

I know, too, that this not unexpected reaction has reminded me again of my marginality in the eyes of those who proclaim the absolutes of the Church. I am reminded of a recent open, candid conversation with a Big Guy of the Church, regarding the aspects of being a priest and/or a therapist/counselor/healer.

[Note: a Big Guy of the Church is the same as a Big Guy in any corporate setting—someone who has been assigned Big Guy status by a whole bunch of littler guys, so that the Big Guy will take the responsibility of worrying about finances, insurance, public relations, legalities/rules/codes; keeping wealthy investors pleased while maintaining decorum and good taste among smaller investors; being present for photo opportunities; emceeding solemn assemblies; kissing babies; directing overly-serious Almost-Big-Guys; and generally protecting the ass of the Institution. I am aware that being a Big Guy of the Church is a burdensome task, even as I know that some Big Guys (like littler guys) get caught up in their Big Guy-ness, while others struggle hard to keep in touch with their divine-simple-scared-earthbound existence. The Big Guy I was with is one, I think, who struggles (and I love him for that), even as he feels the codes and canons increasingly enveloping his windpipe]

He said, in the course of our discussion, that there had been "rumors" about me in the past.

[Note: I couldn't help but notice that as he said this, he looked down at the tabletop and moved some papers around; with that appeared the memory of another Big Guy, just a few years before, who made the exact same movement of paper-shuffling after telling me that he heard that I was a known troublemaker, probably a communist, and certainly not a little guy he wanted in his Christian Institution; and then came a flood of memories of look-down-and-shuffle- papers movements from my past...of being told to leave a seminary, of being told to leave a parish, of being told to stop doing...well, the memories transported me for a few moments to that nether-world of NO-YOU-CAN'T, and I wondered if all of these papers on all of these desktops added up to what my friend Lel calls "MY PERMANENT RECORD!"]

"What rumor?"

With some obvious discomfort, the Big Guy said that he heard that I had "mixed socially" with counseling "clients" in the past, the evidence being that I had invited many such clients to an annual Christmas party at my home, as well as inviting others to join me in various Thanksgiving dinners at home, plus sharing a weekly Wednesday-

afternoon Eucharist with many of “them” in that same home.

Guilty as charged, I acknowledged—and then suggested that my perception of the Gospel was one of *inclusion* rather than exclusion, that the Gospel narrative was a continuing drama of the Anointed One going and coming from one meal to another, that most of the Gospel stories were matters of people perceiving the divine in each other as equals, as brothers and sisters, as companions rather than “clients.”

[Note: “Client” is a rather new term to the ecclesiastic lexicon; although its root is in the Latin cliens, which means “follower,” it is not a term historically connected to religion, for it connotes a profession, a business in which one is paid for specific expertise; one could, of course, argue that Jesus’ followers were his “clients” because they “paid” him with room and board, but that would seemingly contradict the very essence of his message, I think; no, “client” is a matter of Me-Other, rather than me-brother, a term to separate the “expert” from the ignorant, to define the payee from the payer, to separate the Mountaintop from the mountain climber. While the Church has almost always been paid for its services—through pledges, pass-the-plate, etc.—it became uncomfortable in the recent advancement of “pastoral counseling” by worker-priests—and so the counselors increasingly took on the language of the world of “secular” counselors: doggone it, if these secular types could call their counselees “clients,” then so could we in the Church—and, by golly, maybe our Church types would look almost as professional as those secular types—and charge almost as much!]

The Big Guy understood my point, I believe, yet countered with a few psychiatric-psychological parables of his own: like the counselor he knew who wouldn’t attend the wedding of one of her clients, for that would have broken the professional Code of Ethics she had signed, which proscribed any “other” relationship with a client; or like the psychiatrist who would literally ignore a client/patient when passing him on the street, so as not to “confuse” the clinical relationship....

[Note: More memories flood my brain and gut and soul, as I remember such stories being thrown at me during clinical supervision in graduate school, as lessons in how to stay remote, objective, clinically-pure, scientifically-removed...and yet being confused by the healing narratives of the Gospels...and even more confused by two beloved psychiatrists (and supervisors) who told me that such stories were death-dealing to therapists and clients alike, for the remoteness simply conveyed mock superiority; and further memories that one of those doctors was so rejected and shamed by his brethren that he took his own life—and that the other (one of the most aware and brilliant people I have ever known) was removed as Director of the State Hospital because he publicly said that the nurses gave better and more humane treatment than did the shrinks...Oh, oh—Tom, these are not helpful, supportive memories to be having in this debate—or are they?]

But where is the Christ, the crucifixion, the resurrection—and the priest!—in all of that, I asked (yelled?). Why do I need that mantle of “professional otherness” when I am called—in fact, *ordained*—to be a *cliens*, a follower, not of the “medical-model” but of the Anointed One?

[Note: Whatever encouragement I was feeling at the moment—and there wasn’t a lot—came from recent readings in the work of James Hillman, of readings in the mind and heart of another psychiatrist, Dr. Tom Rusk, who can no longer even utter “therapist” as a self-description because of the baggage the term now carries; of the

words of Stephen R. Schwartz, former spokesperson for The Course in Miracles, who has been ostracized by fellows in both the Course world and the medical establishment, and who now simply refers to himself as a “teacher;” of Dr. Sheldon Kopp and Dr. Carl Hammerschlag. Oh thank you, distant voices, for saying out loud, with both experience and abandon, what I have heard so little in my own “therapeutic” and “religious-cum-scientific” world: that it is simply okay to be simple and direct and as self-disclosing as possible, without asking a professional guild to affirm the process.]

The Big Guy, I am sure, both heard and understood my plea. It’s one of the reasons I have loved him—not for his Big Guyness, but for the pastor, the shepherd who lies behind the mantle of his Officialdom. There is that twinkle in his eye—that sense that he is still a little guy in Big Guy robes—which makes the difference. I knew, though, that the twinkle wasn’t what it once was...and I fear that it will be finally deadened by the machinery of Bigdom. I fear that for each and all of us.

He reminded me again that there were complaints about me...that he was required to confront me with them. Before I could utter my “Go ahead!” he did: one gentleman, it seemed, was sure that I had conveyed unhelpful thoughts to his then-wife in counseling—that I had “brain-washed” her with ideas of self-worth, and given her thoughts about herself which made her into a “different person”—and because of that, the man felt that he had received an inequitable division of property in the resulting divorce...and that, therefore, this gentleman thought that the Institution and I should make up the financial difference.

[Note: I immediately remembered seeing a poster many years ago which said, “When someone tells you it’s not the money, it’s the principal of the thing—always remember it’s the money!” Yes, as much as this conversation with the Big Guy was about a discussion of the priestly role, it was really about fear—real fear—that the institution was going to get suckered or sued or both, that large amounts of money might be demanded to make a complaint “go away.” Yeah, I knew, this isn’t about Jesus or theology—this is about naked institutional fear....]

I reminded him that there had been similar complaints previously—from former spouses who had said that (especially) women had gotten “independent” and “strong-willed” after going through the counseling process; I assured him that there would likely be more such complaints, and he would have to decide within himself what a counselor/priest was called to do. And I would then decide, within myself, what those implications were for my own priesthood.

“But what about the fact that you always hug people—men and women—and kiss them on the cheek? Is *that* professional?”

No, I said, it’s not...and I don’t *intend* it to be. It’s being a priest, a human, a celebrator, an equal. And I reminded him that I always greeted him and departed from him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, simply because I loved him. He smiled faintly and looked down at the desktop, shuffling some papers again.

[Note: My father, long physically dead, taught me that it was more than okay to hug and kiss each other; in non-theological language, but only by modeling, he conveyed that it is a sign and symbol of a life together, an inclusion, a ritual, a liturgy, an exclamation point offered reciprocally in times both of grief and joy; my hugs and kisses on the cheek emanate partly from my agony of missing his whiskered cheek against mine, partly from my joy of memory in that whiskered cheek pressing its love to me in greeting]

or reunion or needed reminder. Of all the things he wanted to teach me about his life, business, friendship, success, sex, fatherhood, it is the one lesson I captured and kept for my own survival in a world without his physical presence or his continued lessons. I have often felt that if I could go back in time to meet Joseph or Jesus or Lincoln or Gandhi or King—or Dad—I would hug and kiss each of them on the cheek, and they would kiss me on the cheek in return. Silly, huh?]

He reminded me, in his Big Guyness, that if these complaints were formally pursued, he would likely have to bring presentments (formal charges) against me, and then follow the canon laws of adjudication.

I told him (without bravado, I hope) that I knew of nothing that the Church—or a civil court—could take from me that I wasn't willing to give up; that I understood he had to protect the Corporate Butt; that I was comfortable with his role as a Big Guy, simply because that was the System we were in.

Our conversation ended with a hug and a kiss on the cheek between this Big Guy and this little guy.

In the hours that followed—in my aloneness—I lost some of my courage, and became fearful, wondering again if I had somehow missed something in my development and my training, something which would make me understand the need for remoteness and otherness in my work and my life as a priest. But in the days which followed, as I drove thousands of miles across the country, I came back in touch with much I needed to remember: that even in my struggle for inclusiveness, I remain too remote and too “other” for my healing, for my soul's health, and for my life in the Gospel.

[Note: During that road trek, I stopped to visit with my mother and sister and brother-in-law. My mother told me of a dear friend of hers, a woman who had not “liked” my mother initially because of “something” my sister had done. It seems that my sister, who is among other things an Elder in her church, had listened intently and sympathetically to the former daughter-in-law of this woman, as the former described what she felt was abuse in her marriage. That daughter-in-law later decided to divorce her husband, and my sister was seen as the catalyst of the break-up; it was only later that the mother-in-law was able to see the true nature of the circumstances, and, consequently, able to “forgive” my sister—and, by extension, then able to allow my own mother to become her dear and cherished friend. I was so heartened by the story—and so pleased by the caring of my sister—that I wanted to send a note back to the Big Guy, suggesting that my sins of inclusion and “unprofessionalism” should not be blamed on me but on some rampant, uncontrollable genetic strain in our family!]

In that car—and in the weeks that followed—I came back in touch with writers/mentors James, Tom, Stephen, Sheldon and Carl, as well as my old psychiatrist friends, along with hundreds of souls who have celebrated hugs and kisses on the cheek for all these years, folks who allowed me the honor of sitting with them in times of immense grief and ultimate resurrection—and I knew that I was headed “where” I want to end up, even if I occasionally screw up on the journey.

Ultimately, of course, the importance is really not about me. Nor is it especially about the pros and cons of therapy and counseling styles. For I know and love many people in those occupations, and I believe that many are struggling with these same issues. But I also believe that the entire paradigm of “experts” and “otherness” and inflated fees will finally fall of its own weight—for love and honor and connection and

new life will never come from guilds and diplomas and medical jargon, but from people sitting together in common grief and discovery and hope, as people have for thousands of years before this millennial obsession with fancy titles, fancier offices, expensive cars, and elitist schools became *de rigueur*. We need only look to the promises of the Beatitudes, the communities of free healing, the possibilities of following the Christ within us.

Resurrection follows inner passion (literally, “suffering”). It does not follow from insights, resolutions, consultations current jargon, fake prosperity, psychobabble or false promises. The suffering is in the denial of self-esteem, self-love and other-love. The resurrection is in the living—the action—of love, as difficult as that may seem. In dinners together, in telling our stories to each other, in hugs and kisses on the cheek, and in all the other silliness we can possibly create as Big and little guys.

Friends, of course, counsel me to seek the wisdom of patience, adding that, after all, the Big Guys are simply trying to do the best they can within the restrictions of Big Guy positions.

My inner response is, on the one hand, real thanks for being reminded of my need for patience and wisdom (God knows I need that reminder daily!); and yet, on the other hand, my memory of one of Martin Luther King’s writings looms in my soul: that patience is a great virtue, but it may also become a great excuse for inaction and self-deceit.

Blacks maintained their patience (even as they do to this day), but they also decided that it was time to speak out and act.

Women maintained their patience (even as they do to this day), but they also decided it was time to speak out and act.

Gays maintained their patience (even as they do to this day), but they also decided it was time to speak out and act.

Many “marginal” folks in our success-at-any-cost society maintain their patience, but they are increasingly demanding that they be noticed.

And, perhaps, those in the Body of Christ who see “counseling” as more than a clinical Me-you scientific process will maintain their patience, even as they “shout from the rooftops” (as the Christ suggested) that the Gospel is about *equality*, about *inclusiveness*, about *new life*.

And I think of the fact that when people come to servant-leader communities for food or clothing or counseling or simple acknowledgement of their humanity—places like “Open Door Community” in Atlanta, “Andre House” in Phoenix, “Casa Maria” in Tucson, and the many Catholic Worker houses across this land—they are not called clients or patients or foreigners or aliens or less-than; they are called *guests*, as is in the tradition of the Nazarene, of hospitality, of free healing, of open meals, of the Body of Christ.

All of this has taken on a current poignancy in these last few weeks here, as we saw literally dozens and dozens of people show up for various “sittings,” not to do their own soul work, but, clearly, to see what this new guru—this marginal shrink/priest—might have among his secret potions to transform their lives by magic. Once that it was apparent that we were not promoting “celebrity healings” but rather a common journey *through* our own wounds, most have gone away in disappointment and chagrin.

Good God. What are we doing to each other in this “post-modern world?”

I can't allow any of this to craziness to occupy my thoughts or concerns. We must try to forge community in this tiny corner of Creation, knowing that we can only deal with our own lives and hopes, having no control whatsoever over institutions or other people's motives.

Amen. So be it. Amen.

SUPPORT

[from Latin *supportare*, to carry]

A letter arrives, bearing a local postmark:

Dear Father Tom,

I've heard you speak, and I liked what I heard. Actually, I'm amazed that someone is speaking love and sanity.

I've read your newsletter, and, for the most part, I've liked what I've read. In fact, I'm somewhat astonished that such a publication comes out of a "church" kind of place.

I've seen what goes on at St. Dismas House, and I'm amazed at the spirit of acceptance and hope I've seen in the people who are there.

For all of that and more, I give thanks for (as you call it) the "grace" of such a place—such a spirit—in our disconnected and busy world.

Yet, there is a nagging voice within me that tells me that the future is very unstable for your efforts, simply because you will not be supported financially, and, therefore, this new place and spirit I've found will vanish like so many other hopes I've had in my life. I certainly don't mean to discourage you—in fact, I would *encourage* you in any way I could imagine—but I wonder if you've considered some of the real, cold facts of life:

Apparently, you're not financially supported by any church body or denomination; you don't seem to threaten people with hellfire-and-damnation, causing "fear-dollar"; you seem to work mainly with the poor and other social "outcasts"; you don't seem to "pass the hat" very much; you don't have "memberships" to bring in steady income; it appears that you don't hire any fund-raising consultants; St. Dismas House is located in an "undesirable" part of town; in the newsletter, you write things and print articles that are controversial; you don't promote things like "bronze plaques" to attract big-dollars; you openly welcome Gays and Lesbians and Blacks and Hispanics and Recovering and other (wonderful) people; you seem to allow real feelings and thoughts to be expressed openly; you're seen on the TV news (with your ponytail!) advocating the use of public funds to support a medical clinic for the poor and for HIV/AIDS patients; you oppose the death penalty in the state that executes more people than any other.

So—WHERE IS YOUR FUTURE FINANCIAL SUPPORT GOING TO COME FROM?

Someone told me that St. Dismas House is running on money you received when you cashed in your life insurance policy this year. *That's it?!*

Someone else told me that you're planning to go to the "affluent" part of town and beg on the streets!

I find all of this pretty "crazy" (as you say), and I don't understand it. But I hope something works—because I love you and the other people there—and *I* feel loved there—and I hope it doesn't all go away just as I'm

starting to feel that there might be some hope...

Wouldn't you know this would arrive just as I'm trying to formulate, in my own mind and heart, our continuing policy on support and finances. I guess this is another serendipitous gift—a form of support in itself—to get me on track. I try to visualize the words of John Calvi: “I do believe strongly that if you are doing the work that you are supposed to do, and you shine that light as brightly as you can, you will attract not only the help of other people, but also support. If you are doing beautiful work, people will see it...If you do your best, people will help you.”

Okay—for better or worse—here goes:

It will be our Community policy to have no funding drives (professional or otherwise); no pledge cards; no gathering of funds before, during, or after Mass; no formal fees for services such as Sharing Group, retreats, Gatherings, celebrations, or similar activities.

We shall beg, and only beg.

It is a shamed and dishonorable act in our present society, yet it is at the very heart of at least two thousand years of spiritual practice, and it will remind us of our social realities. It will remind us that we are fools. It will remind us continually of our vulnerability, our place, our presence among those who daily must beg for the mercies of the world. It will remind us that we are called to do “beautiful work” as best we can...and the result of that is ultimately none of our business nor under our control. It will remind us, too, of the sacrifices, commitment, and solidarity of anyone who may choose to offer support, financial or otherwise. It will remind us to have faith.

All of it scares me to the bone; that, too, is a gift.

STRANGER

[from Latin *extraneus*, foreign]

I think that a wonderful new life is appearing in this place!

A few weeks ago, there was a knock on the front door, and I opened it to find a tallish, fairly gaunt man, looking to be in his early-fifties, standing there in a nice suit, smiling at my welcome. He seemed somewhat hesitant to enter—almost apologetic for his presence, wishing, it seemed, to discuss some matter in the doorway—but he finally agreed to enter, and we sat together.

He informed me almost immediately that he was a former lawyer, and that he had AIDS. He remained very matter-of-fact, adding that he had gotten my name from a clinic nurse, that he had heard around the clinic that this might be a safe place, and that he was here to make a request: he had been convening an “AIDS support group” in which folks might discuss their health and personal struggles, but he felt that he was ill-equipped to handle such a task, and he wanted to know if I would be willing to lead the group discussions once a week, using this House as the meeting site.

The longer we talked, I felt as though my “opposite” was sitting across the room from me: he was fairly introverted, very careful and precise in his mannered presentation, obviously substantially conservative in his social perspective, and clearly quite fundamental in his Christian theology. But then I began to offer comments that might pique his sense of humor, and I discovered that his wit was deep and wide. He could, I realized, laugh at himself...a sign of health and depth, I think.

We talked and talked, laughing at one moment, commiserating the next. I found myself deeply drawn to his presence, his character, his apparent soul. He proceeded to offer every reason imaginable as to why I “shouldn’t” like him, yet his litany only reflected his inner shame, not my negative judgment of him.

When finally we finished our discussion, I pointedly told him how much I enjoyed his company, that I would love to hear more of his story, that I hoped he and his companions would meet here the following week...and, impulsively, I took the momentary risk to embrace him and kiss his cheek. He blushed, tears welled in his eyes, and he went off into the darkness of evening.

In the past three weeks, the House has suddenly filled with HIV/AIDS guests, and many have said on arrival, “Jerry sent me.”

Discussions have begun to move the weekly, county AIDS clinic to this House, which means that before long, we will be gifted with the presence of literally hundreds of folks who are, just like the rest of us on earth, simply trying to stay alive...with some friends around.

RUINED

[from Latin *ruina*, to reduce]

In Sharing Group, after a long Lenten week of new folks, new situations, new discoveries, there was discussion of frustrations and joys, confusion and certainties.

In the middle of all that, Sr. Maria blurted out, almost in a sense of sober joy, “The only thing I seem certain of right now is that I’m *ruined for life!*” It appeared that half the Group was startled and confused by the comment, yet the other half nodded in agreement. But she was questioned about the declaration, and she tried to explain: that she had been so comfortable in her “previous” existence, being a satisfied officer in a national insurance company; that she had made good money, had a good house, had a pleasant middle-American neighborhood; that everything seemed to “work” just fine; that the matters of the poor and the outcast in this country and around the world were simply and largely remote to her own world...but that *now*, immersed in the day-to-day world of those folks—her friends and Companions!—she was ruined for the rest of her life for the possibility of true denial and pleasant escape into the never-never land of blissful ignorance, so to speak. It was a two-edged sword, she said: the joy of this new life, yet the realization of “no easy escape.”

Now we understood what she was talking about. We looked around the room at the faces of other folks who were “ruined for life.”

Within twenty-four hours, I had a vivid dream about that, and—while I rarely consciously dream or think much about it—the next morning I followed the advice of an old mentor who had always suggested that a strong dream be “written out” upon awaking, that I attempt to write out the dream and then “finish it” by writing out where I thought the dream was heading. Somewhat surprisingly to myself, I wrote out the following:

He ventured into the desert of his soul, vibrant with the fear of discovery, but even more fearful of *not* knowing...and he sought out the voices from within, the voices that might contest in earnest about truth and meaning and possibility and options...for he wanted to know, more than anything else, what his “power” meant...how to recognize it, how to use it, how to live with it—and so, in the deep recesses of his very being, he shouted with abandon: “Tell me how to *BE!*” And before that final word was even finished, he began to hear a loud and familiar voice—a voice he had heard since his early childhood, a voice he had heard a thousand and a thousand times from within him and around him—that desert voice—and it said, almost soothingly in its demanding beckoning:

LISTEN TO ME: How long I’ve waited for you to ask so directly...so sincerely...so vulnerably...so expectantly! Hear me now, and hear me attentively:

You shall seek to look powerful, for appearances are the essence of power. You shall learn to Dress-for-Success, so that all may know that you are the King, the Chosen One.

You shall procure the best in electronics, be it in your power-home or in your power-car or in your power-office.

You shall fill your surroundings, in all places and at all times, with things-tons of things—that bespeak the attainment of privilege and superiority

and...*power*.

You shall evidence the ways of the Professional—the Elect—with a demeanor of certainty and knowledge and aloofness and seduction. You shall proclaim power-appearance throughout your kingdom, even unto the next generations, by teaching the ways of power-appearance to your children, teaching them that they are the hope of future power-appearance—that they, too, deserve to be treated as special, as the chosen ones, as those blessed by the Powerful One.

You shall not be concerned about the cost of power-appearance, either now or in the future, for I shall protect you and sustain you in your denial, even unto the end of time.

You shall appear to be omnipotent—even in your impotence...and it shall be good!

Yet even before the word *good* could be fully appreciated or enjoyed, another voice—a newer, developing, quieter voice—was whispering to him: But you know the new car doesn't do it, the computer doesn't do it, the cellular phone doesn't do it, the engraved stationary doesn't do it, the thick carpet doesn't do it, the nameplate doesn't do it, the suit doesn't do it, the advanced degree doesn't do it, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual doesn't do it, the title doesn't do it, the staff meeting doesn't do it, the appointment book doesn't do it, the stock-option doesn't do it, the leveraged buyout doesn't do it, the fax doesn't do it, the white collar-blue collar-clergy collar doesn't do it, the internet doesn't do it, the two-martini-lunch doesn't do it, the lobbying doesn't do it, the limo doesn't do it, the political Party doesn't do it, televangelist phony-baloney doesn't do it, the quarterly bonus doesn't do it, 80-hours-a-week doesn't do it, franchising doesn't do it, networking doesn't do it....

AS I WAS SAYING, the other demanding, seductive voice continued:

You shall seek to feel powerful, for feelings of power will encourage your power.

You shall expect to be treated with the deference due an anointed one, a royal figure.

You shall not feel like one of “them,” the powerless, the riff-raff.

You shall fill your power-feeling with directives and orders and commands to lesser-powers, thereby allowing them to feel personally and intimately their lesser-power.

You shall confirm your power-feeling by excluding and demeaning lesser-powers, either by power-manipulation or power-neighborhoods or power-schools or power-races or power-economies or power-weaponry or power-politics or power-religions or power-agencies.

You shall identify your feelings of power by making all things *BIG*: your corporations, your offices, your homes, your buildings, your cathedrals, your congregations.

You shall convey your power-feeling to your younger generations, by reminding them that whatever they want they deserve, that whatever they want will be given unto them even by their wishing, that whatever they want will be provided to them by the power of your whim...and by the glad sacrifice of lesser-powers in other races, other nations, other

economies, other tribes.

You shall feel powerful, even in your small, isolated world...and it shall be good!

The other voice returns to him in the desert: Oh, my gentle one, look within you and around you...you know that the country club doesn't do it, life insurance doesn't do it, prejudice doesn't do it, tyranny doesn't do it, the Dow-Jones doesn't do it, Toys-R-Us doesn't do it, private schooling doesn't do it, public schooling doesn't do it, the ivy league doesn't do it, having-neighbors-just-like-me doesn't do it, a gated enclave doesn't do it, eternal-youth doesn't do it, segregation doesn't do it, exclusivity doesn't do it, capitalism-communism-socialism-greedism doesn't do it, cheap gas doesn't do it, therapy doesn't do it, inheritance doesn't do it, the gold card doesn't do it, TV Guide doesn't do it...

The other voice returns to his desert mind, but any soothing tone has given away to challenge: *ARE YOU STILL LISTENING TO ME!*

You shall exercise your power, for it is only through exercise that power and strength are wrought!

You shall proclaim the Creation as your own, to be used and abused at your will, thereby confirming your chosenness.

You shall imprint Godly inscriptions on your money, your buildings, your legislation, your speeches, your blessings...lest any lesser-powers ever question or forget your chosenness.

You shall define what is good and proper and acceptable, be it economic systems, sexual orientation, gender superiority, mental capacity, racial acceptance, immigration standards, health-care delivery, or ethical conduct.

You shall appoint royal priests in proper robes to intone—throughout the land from pulpits and cable channels—solemn, empty words of affirmation and pontification to each of your acts, lest any of the lesser-powers question your anointed power.

You shall proclaim your own world order, as a declaration of your greatness, your anointment, your righteousness unto all tribes and peoples of the earth.

You shall exercise your rule with the power of a god...and it shall be good!

But wait, interrupted the other, still, small voice: listen...listen to the murmurings of your heart and soul, listen to what you've known deep within you since the moment of your birth, listen to your experience of life: lying doesn't do it, weaponry doesn't do it, hardness doesn't do it, security doesn't do it, loopholing doesn't do it, covert killing doesn't do it, permission doesn't do it, space travel doesn't do it, special accounting doesn't do it, posturing doesn't do it, xenophobia doesn't do it, assassination doesn't do it, Preferred-Nation-Status doesn't do it, capital punishment doesn't do it, breaking trust doesn't do it, stonewalling doesn't do it, trickle-down-trickle-up doesn't do it, the Federal Reserve Board doesn't do it, nods of approval doesn't do it....

And suddenly the desert-wanderer screamed out to inner voices, **THEN WHAT DOES DO IT? WHAT ALLOWS ME TO BE WHAT I'M MEANT TO BE? WHICH OF YOU IS GOD? WHICH OF YOU IS LOVING ME, WHICH OF YOU IS KILLING ME?**

The loving and killing voices became silent.
Only his own plaintive voice could be heard in the dunes:
Then who am I to *be*? he asked the desert.
Then who am I to *be*? he asked the sand.
Then who am I to *be*? he asked the mirages.
Then who am I to *be*? he asked the wind.
Then who am I to *be*? he asked the sun.
Then who am I to *be*? he asked the self.
Then who am I to *be*? he asked the Self.
He stared at the endless horizon for a long, long time.
Finally, he turned in the sand, beginning the long trek out of the desert, heading
for Jerusalem...knowing perhaps for the first time, that he was thankfully, joyfully ruined
for life.

TRADITION

[from Latin *tradere*, to hand over]

[I speak to the several hundred delegates and clergy at a Church Convention, to consider some thoughts regarding a proposed resolution to exclude any "practicing homosexual" from being ordained as a clergyperson—a policy, I believe, that has much to do with church and secular politics, with a particular fundamentalist and pseudo-pietistic view of the Church and society, with a view which is exclusive, punitive, divisive, and obsessive]:

My brothers and sisters in Christ, I thank you for allowing me to offer some remarks on the present Resolution, a resolution that comes *not* from a consistent diocesan study of human sexuality—as the Presiding Bishop and the General Convention of our Church asked us to fulfill—nor from a deliberate and corporate study of Scripture, but from casual discussions and religious/political gerrymandering, perhaps feeding the unproven fears and unstated biases of our own invention.

I remain puzzled as to why we are targeting the homosexual population for exclusion and institutional wrath. We have, as a Church and a denomination, done the same in the past against Blacks, Native-Americans, various ethnic groups, and women; is it that we need to always have some group that we can exclude, humiliate, and feel "holier" than? Do we believe that heterosexuals will somehow be better ("sinless") priests? If so, how and why?

It's interesting, isn't it, that in the "proof-texts" which were offered in this Resolution, there wasn't even *one* from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the Christ is more interested in what lies in the heart and soul of a Christian than in a sexual litmus-test. I don't remember Him saying, "Follow me, all you *white, male, upper-class heterosexuals*, and I will make you fishers of men."

If we are to accept, as our Resolution-promoters wish, the "crimes and punishments" as offered in the "proof-texts" of Genesis, Leviticus, Judges, and so forth, we had better read a bit wider in those Books-of-The-Wrathful-God-of-Israel ...and then we had better admit that we have some BIG problems for this Convention to address!

You see, if we accept God's supposed deathly condemnation of homosexuals from these sources, then we have to address the OTHER condemnations that are listed, many of which have the *same* weight of condemnation. While there seems to be an endless compilation of "crimes," let's consider even a few, seeing how our future (and present!) clergy would fare:

A priest shall not marry a woman who is not a virgin ...or who is divorced....

A priest shall not trim his hair or beard....

A priest shall have no physical defects....

No one shall eat any meat containing blood....

No one shall do anything that is "unnatural"....

If anyone curses a parent (even a sexually-abusive parent), they shall be put to death....

No one shall wear clothing made of two different materials....

No one shall plant two kinds of seed in one field....

Oral sex with a member of the opposite sex shall be punished by death....

No one shall wear the clothing of the opposite sex (such as women wearing slacks...and priests wearing albs?)....

No man shall have intercourse with a woman during her monthly period....

Because, as Leviticus reminds us, "whoever does any of these disgusting things will no longer be considered one of God's people."

Wow. If we consider these condemnations and all the rest in these books, where on earth are we going to find the "innocent" people (as mentioned in Genesis) to be our priests? And if so many of these items are supposed to be punished by death, why are we not punishing me and every other current priest?

Did anyone notice, too, in these "proof-texts" that women ("virgins and innocent") were allowed to be raped and beaten so that the men would remain pure? Are these further "moral models" offered to us from the good-old-religious-days? Where, dear friends, is the Christ in all of this?

Perhaps the Christ of our hearts and souls is also found in Leviticus—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"—yet I never hear that quotation uttered in these Resolutions.

The references to "tradition" in the Resolution are simply not accurate. There have been thousands and thousands of homosexual priests in the universal Church (including several Popes and lots of pre- and post-Reformation bishops) in all these two-thousand years; many have been caring, devoted, and creative (just like heterosexuals), and some have been negative, egotistical, and controlling (just like heterosexuals). And *all*—heterosexual *and* homosexual—have been sinful ("full of sin") in one way or another during every day of their adult lives. Just like you, just like me. Hence, the saving grace of the Christ!

Why are we so unwilling to admit that we know almost nothing about the "cause" of homosexuality, even with various theories of psychodynamics and developmental process? Why do we ignore the obvious facts that there is virtually *no* evidence that men, especially, somehow "choose" this sexual orientation—or can somehow "change" that orientation at someone else's whim? Why do we not want to investigate various sources of increasing evidence of relational ties between sexual orientation and individual DNA?

And what does all of this have to do with one's gifts for the priesthood? Why, when we are seemingly ready to "play God" by denying Christ's ministry to a large human population, are we too lazy or prejudiced to do our homework—again as the General Convention asked us to do?

In the Catechism—on page 855 of the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*—there is the question "Who are the ministers of the Church?" followed by the answer "The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons." If, then, we have no condemnation of homosexuals as ministers of the laity (obviously the first and *highest* form of ministers, according to the Prayer Book), why do we now insist on banning homosexuals from the "lower" orders of ministers (bishops, priests, and deacons)?

Thank you for your kindness in listening, as the Body of Christ, to my thoughts...

[*The Resolution to ban "practicing" homosexuals from the ordained priesthood was approved by a 2-1 margin*].

CLARITY

[from Latin *claris*, to be clear]

Excerpts from another letter, this one from a long distance:

Dear Tom,

...I'm grateful for our "journey" together. When we first met...you asked me what I wanted from you. I don't think that I knew at the time. I knew I was hurting somewhere and wanted relief. Well, together with our Companions, we set out to find that somewhere. I believe today that we/I have found some of the "somewhere's." I am grateful for the letting go and growth I experienced over the months with you and all the other Companions...Thanks for sharing your adventure, your struggles: in doing so, you shed light on my struggles. Too busy or not busy enough. In-action. I struggle with clarity. What is clarity? How does one become clear? Why am I here? What am I to do here? Confusion brings to me laziness. Pray for me to receive clarity of purpose. Can you offer any paths to clarity? Did the solitude of the St. Dismas House renovation offer you help or help you gain some clarity? Is clarity ever achieved? Or, as I suspect, is clarity a process that ultimately is never achieved? "Only by the Grace of God." Prayers and thanks....

Whew. That's a tough one...at least for this person. If there were a twelve-step program uniquely styled to "clarity," I think that I would need a new "chip" every three or four hours. But it is something I constantly struggle with—partly because I know that virtually every stimulus around me is screaming at me: "Stay confused...stay busy...stay lazy...buy things...eat things...own things...plan things...stay scattered..." And I often listen to those voices. So...I need reminders...lots of reminders...and I try to remember a few simple clues to finding the path back to clarity, even if it's for only a few moments, for I realize that those few moments are literally the life-preservers of my existence.

One I use is the memory of the life-changing moment in the story of the Christ telling us to cast the stone-of-death, the stone-of-exclusion, only if we are without blemish...not the moment when he said those words, but the moment before, the moment (scripture tells us) when he knelt in the sand, when he stopped in the midst of chaos, sought clarity, and then acted in the aura of that light. The text suggests that he wrote something or marked something in the sand—and that's another wonderful reminder for me because we don't know what he wrote or marked or drew—we only know that it brought him the clarity he needed to then proceed to utter not only a life-saving remark, but a remark which would change forever how we all think about judgment, forgiveness, and self-deception/denial.

He stopped in the midst of chaos...Oh, how many times I need to remember that...and then to remember that he didn't "try to figure it all out"—he focused on what was happening, inside him and outside him, in that moment...he brought the light to the situation instead of trying to drag the situation to the light...and then he got on with it! He summoned the courage to stand up straight, to take what he had learned from his clarifying moment, to proceed with life. There are times when I want to languish in the sand...to kneel for a few moments in pseudo-clarity...and then lie down in the comfort and safety of the sand...to deny that I perceive clarity, to deny that I have the power to act

on my own vision of Christness.

And there's another component for me to all of this remembering, this pausing, this clarity-seeking: not to punish myself for needing to pause, needing to remember, needing courage. I find that when I do this process with intention and integrity, the questions of "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" fall away to a minor whisper, for my courage informs my intuition...and my intuition informs my soul...that what I have clarified is just fine in this particular situation.

Does any of that make sense?

There have been times this week (every week, of course) when I've had to kneel in the sand, to remind my self and my intuition and my soul of the Journey I'm on. A lot of things have been happening at St. Dismas House and in this community...things which have beckoned me in several directions, due to the wonderful Companions I have met recently. And, as I told some of them yesterday, I've had to kneel again in the sand to re-inform my clarity—to let clarity re-inform me—of what is appropriate, what is holy, what is ego-driven, what is death-dealing, what is life-giving, what is offered by Grace. Hard stuff. Glorious stuff. But the process allowed me to acknowledge that Dismas House is meant to be a place of safety and transformation—a place where anyone can find a personal spot to kneel in the sand to make their own sand-drawing for life—and only that. I/we, in a millisecond of clarity and Grace, must know that we cannot be all things to all people—that the drama of life which goes on in this place must have a simple and perceptible plot and story: to offer hospitality to any and all who seek a presence here...to any and all who are about to have stones hurled at them...or who are attempting to heal from the stone-bruises of exclusion or racism or poverty or rejection or abandonment. We cannot "fix" much of that, but we can simply be here, to kneel together, to share our sand-drawings, to stand up straight together in courage.

Out of that clarity, then, I have been able to make a few simple decisions.

We will, beginning immediately, be a hospitality center on Thursday of each week, for those people going to the HIV/AIDS clinic nearby. As that activity brings together not only the patients themselves, but also their families—parents, spouses, children, partners—we will offer child-care, informal discussions, counseling by staff and volunteers, meals, healing/anointing liturgies, etc. In other words, we will offer what we are called to offer by the Christ: *ourselves*—our souls and bodies—in our own struggles, our own pain, our own joy, our own resurrections. And that is enough.

On many Saturdays in the immediate future, we shall continue to hold "Gatherings"—where people in this area and around the country can know the endless power of kneeling in the sand together in a room for several hours. Again, a simple ministry of presence. It is possible that in the not-too-distant future some of these Gatherings will take place in prisons and treatment centers...and we will receive Grace there, too.

Clarity? Sense of meaning? The path to Life?

I learned a prayer from a Zen Buddhist nun a few weeks ago, and I've been repeating it over and over and over as my own spiritual discipline: "Thanks for everything. I have no complaint whatsoever."

That doesn't mean that I'm not angry, distraught, upset, and concerned about many things I see and feel in the world around me. It does mean (for me) that the prayer sums up my relationship with the Creator, with the source of Grace and clarity...and it

does remind me to kneel in the sand at all times and in all places.

Grace brought me both you and your letter, dear Brother...and I have no complaints whatsoever.

HEALTH

[from Old English *haelth*, condition of an organism]

It was the end of a very long day of a very long week.

Images were flying through my skull and gut with great abandon: of the gentle HIV-infected woman who had preached at the “AIDS Service” in Longview; of the glorious young children down the street to whose house I had the honor to deliver some food; of the beautiful men and women who make up the staff of the medical clinic, people I have come to cherish for their kindness and humor and spirit and dedication; of the young man who was lying, at that very moment, in one of the bedrooms here, receiving an IV drip of toxic medication, with his mother—who was trying to learn how to prepare the medication—sitting by his side; of the couple who had just left this place after we discussed the difficulties in their marriage (“So tell me why it is that you don’t have a ‘date’ at least once a week after eleven years of marriage”); of the dear and gentle volunteers sitting with guests, simply listening; of the surprise of finding that someone had dropped off some food on the front porch, so we’d have something to offer on Hospitality Day this week; of a lovely Companion saying, “You just let all of humanity walk through here, don’t you!”; of a group of kind Companions working around the dining room table, rolling *To Follow the Christ* posters into mailing tubes; of a Companion, who is trying to change the priorities in her life, dropping off lots of previously-important clothes for people who will need them...

And I had just been on the phone trying to explain to an inquisitive caller what is fairly unexplainable: what St. Dismas House *is*. I grew uncomfortable with my own yammering during the conversation, knowing that life here would make a whole lot more sense if I could offer a simple label, a quick-and-easy tag, something that would condense the wholeness of this place into a simple, declarative sentence. But here I was, attempting to fend off all the easy labels (no, it’s not a place only for AIDS patients...but, yes, we are honored to have many of them visit us often; no, it’s not an “Episcopal” function...but, yes, I’m an Episcopal priest; no, you don’t have to have any particular reason for being here...and, yes, you are certainly welcome to stop by and simply “be here”), and I realized that I sounded no more sure of what I was talking about than the person who was asking all the questions.

And then I reminded myself that my inarticulate discussion was a continuing sign of the health of this place...that the longer we can keep things open and loose and safe and (fairly) disorganized, the better chance we have of not submitting to institutional death; remember, I thought: the model is the New Testament (open-ended, intuitive, responsive—and pretty scary to live out!) rather than the Old (ordered, labeled, rule-bound, deadly—and too comfortable in its absolutes). I remembered a moment earlier, when, in the midst of all the craziness, I had turned to a dear friend and blurted out, “You know what we’ve done, don’t you? We’ve started this large counseling and spiritual center with no staff and no money!” And then there was a pause...and we both laughed rather uncontrollably for awhile.

And suddenly darkness had fallen...and the place was virtually empty...and I found myself wandering around from room to room in the sudden silence, feeling very, very tired...almost floating...realizing that my mind was filling with questions about the future...all the questions and worries over which I had no control. I went out back, stood

on the deck for a few minutes, gazed at some uninvolved stars, and went to the chapel to turn off the lights and clean things up a bit. And I found myself standing in the middle of the room, looking back at the icons of St. Francis, of Damien the Leper, of Dorothy Day, of the Magdalena, of all the Blessed Ones...and as I turned to leave, I glanced down at the Begging Bucket by the door, and noted that there was a one dollar bill lying in the bottom all by itself, and I smiled to the icons and to myself, knowing that it was left by someone who could barely afford a dollar gone. As I flipped the light switch, I was again in the darkness of the backyard...and through the shadows I could see that the AA Step-Study Group was formed around the picnic table, each holding a coffee cup, each intent on the importance of their mutual presence, each searching for ways to simply affirm the next twenty-four hours.

And in that fleeting-yet-pregnant moment, in that defining moment of joy, I knew something very, very important—something I would probably later forget and have to learn anew from another evening’s shadows: I knew that it was imperative to humankind, to each and every one of us in all places at all times, that a Dismas House actually exists...that in other places at other times it might have another name and different faces...but such places, however formed or enlivened, must exist to remind us that we need common ground on which to wander, to grieve, to celebrate, to shout, to laugh, to touch.

I knew in that immense instant that it mattered not how long St. Dismas House might “last” or where it was headed...I knew only that it is. And I said to myself, “Be open to the surprise of it all, Brother Tom. Grace could come again in any given moment.”

Yes, indeed, be open to the surprise of grace, as stated in the sign we put by the front door: “The Christ often comes in the stranger’s guise....”

And I fell into bed...and slept soundly.

CONFESSION

[akin to Latin *fari*, to tell or make known by speech]

Jail has held different meanings for me at different times of my life.

I have been in jail as a prisoner, scared of the unknown, trying to be “brave” and “resolute” for those around me who had chosen, too, to be there for matters of conscience and hope.

I have been a visitor in jails on many, many occasions, in places which evidenced as much misery and racism and hopelessness as I have ever experienced, as I tried to bring some sense of community and connection to the souls who languished therein, both inmates and guards.

I have been in the company of people who surrendered themselves to incarceration for matters of protest or conscientious objection.

But never, until this week in December, had I escorted “the girl next door” to a federal prison....

She and her mother and I left town at about noon, heading for Lexington, four hundred miles away. Although I knew her mother fairly well, I had not spent any time with the young woman herself. I knew that the next twenty-four hours were going to be intense, even as I had no idea of what the mood or character of that time would be.

I was to discover very quickly that I was in the company of a twenty-one year old girl/woman: a young, feminine, intelligent, pretty, charming, witty, serious girl/woman whose life had changed from being a valued, often-promoted bank employee who wanted nothing more than “a house in the suburbs with a husband and a couple of kids” to a convicted felon who was facing forty-nine months (with no parole, under federal guidelines) in a correctional center (aka prison). With absolutely no history of “trouble” of any kind in school or work or with legal authorities, she had—she said—made a quick “stupid” decision to be involved with a “narc” in a drug set-up...and now she was on her way to Lexington to begin four years and one month of “correction.”

She was, she said—more sincerely than I expected—willing to live with the consequences of her actions.

What I heard during those many hours in the car was the voice of a girl/woman trying desperately and openly to forge a sense of hope and optimism from the experience she was facing. We listened to each other and talked with each other about possibilities, about ways of turning this expected desolation into a period of growth and learning and development and skill-training. We covered computers and language and tons of great books and improved writing skills and journal-keeping and correspondence and spiritual direction and research...and we evaded, during most of the time, the very real questions which haunted our individual and collective mind: what will happen to this girl/woman inside that place...who will this girl/woman be when she exits those heavy doors?

We stayed at a motel in Frankfort, nearby Lexington, that evening. As the girl/woman and her mother settled into their room, I asked her to let me know what she wanted for supper—if she wanted to go out somewhere special or just relax. She told me later that she had recently fallen in love with pizza (“Oh, just think of all those years I missed out on eating pizza, thinking that I didn’t like it!”), so I took her favorite pie and toppings back to their room so that she and her mother could spend some invaluable time together. As I left to return to my room, she said, “I would really like you to stay and eat

with us, even for a little while.” It was an easy time together, with some laughter and good memories recited, as the TV, humming quietly, reminded us that K-Mart had absolutely anything we would need for Christmas this year.

As I tried to get to sleep later, staring at the ceiling of my room, I realized how much this girl/woman reminded me of my own kids, how much the conversations carried the same subjects of everyday life and hope, how much any of our lives are altered by seemingly quick decisions, how much we are dependent upon time and place and circumstances. Terrible and wonderful and scary and overwhelming emotions were churning up within me...and I “stuffed” all of it, intent on being “strong” and “positive” for this girl/woman. I tossed and turned throughout the night, thinking of those dear to me, wanting to be with them, wanting to know how to be the best “father” I could to this young soul tomorrow. I slept hardly at all, hoping that she was sleeping soundly.

Daybreak brought a reminder of the Season, with heavy frost and bitter temperature, along with the irony of the motel parking lot being full of police cars (for the new governor had just been inaugurated). The three of us went to breakfast, struggling more and more to keep things light, to allow her to set the tone. We took a few pictures, talked of everyday stuff, and drove through landscapes of white fences and magnificent homes and Kentucky colonels and immense wealth, arriving suddenly at a huge facility...a group of buildings set way back from the highway, appearing pastoral and beckoning.

As we approached the main building at the end of the winding road, the beauty of federal architecture gave way to the imposing presence of barbed wire...stacks and stacks of it, gleaming in the clear wintry sun, reminding us of where we really were...and why.

The wait in the main lobby seemed interminable in its silence and anxiety, as we looked eagerly in the faces of passersby—visitors, prisoners, and guards—for any sign of kindness or acceptance or hope. My admitted suspicion regarding guard-mentality melted somewhat as the officer-in-charge tried to be helpful and friendly (taking this priest aside at one point to tell me a “semi-dirty” joke about a Baptist preacher), telling us as gently as possible about the many regulations related to packages, telephones, visitations, etcetera.

And finally, reality appeared. A woman with a case file, a metal detector, rubber gloves, and a no-nonsense demeanor offered the ultimate statement: “Say goodbye to whoever you wish.” Within an instant, the three of us—the girl/woman, the mother, the priest—connected eyes...a panicky look...and I hugged her tightly, whispering to her something I needed to say. Mother and daughter embraced, as the elder began to cry loudly...and the girl/woman yelled against the vacant walls: “Mother! Don’t!”

That mother and I passed through the mechanized door, heading for the parking area, as she cried openly, unashamedly...and I continued to “stuff” my pain, in order to be “strong” and “helpful.”

Due to the absence of sleep—together with the pain in my heart—I realized in the solemn car that I was feeling very vulnerable. The roles that this mother/woman and I had played previously—hers of “client” and mine of “therapist/priest”—didn’t seem to matter to me at all (Good God, I was not therapist or priest but simply fellow pilgrim!), and we talked for hours and hours of lives and stories and memories and mistakes and craziness...and hope. This mother/woman, for at least several hours, became my own therapist and priest and fellow pilgrim, whether she knew it or not. We simply let each

other say anything about anything. My, oh my, what a true Seasonal gift for such a “strong” and “helpful” man!

We arrived back at the House just in time for the Wednesday afternoon Eucharist. I set about doing the busy-work of preparing the altar, saying hellos, assigning readings to congregated Companions. After reading the Gospel, I mentioned that I really didn’t have much to say as a sermon, only that I found the reading from Philippians to be helpful and hopeful...and I looked across the room into the eyes of the mother/woman, and mentioned that we had had a pretty tough day. Just then, as someone began to lead the Prayers of the People...just then, as I looked deeper into the mirror of the mother/woman’s eyes, all of my pain began to emerge...and I couldn’t “stuff” the pain any longer and be “strong” and “helpful” any longer...and I began to sob...and sob...heaving with despair and joy...understanding the new love that had been born in those twenty-four hours, aware of the love that was offered by these other Companions, dreadfully aware of the daily pain which whirls around us in our seemingly-protected worlds. I knew...I knew...in the midst of all of it that this was a holy day.

So in this Season of Birth, what was birthed?

Well, the girl/woman is okay...in a dorm of girl/women, she is okay.

A dear friend, a long way away, has sent me a letter to send on to Monica.

I was reminded (*WAKE UP*, brother/father/man/child!) of what Grace is available when I allow it to enter my life and soul.

As I ministered, I was ministered unto.

I have a new daughter/sister/girl/woman.

I had the opportunity to “confess” to a sister/mother/priest/woman.

The girl/woman and the mother/woman now know that they are not alone in all of this.

I know again that K-Mart does not have everything we need this Season.

Finally, I realize anew that once again, through Grace and for reasons I will never understand, a whole bunch of grown children found some room at the inn....

HINT

[from Old English *hentan*, to grasp]

I had received word that she was in the hospital, suffering from pains of unknown origin. So I rushed there, got her room number, and stopped by the nurses' station to check on her condition. The charge nurse told me that my friend had just been informed by the doctor that she likely had inoperable tumors on her brain, lung, and stomach...and they were likely cancerous. Stunned by all of that, I proceeded to the room, unsure of anything I had to offer, and talked quietly with her and her husband. She recounted to me what the doctor had said, and we spoke of the implications of all of this on her life. After a while I left, telling them that I would be back on the morrow.

I discovered on my return the next day that everything had changed: some new tests showed that the doctor's "guess" had been wrong, that her problem came not from various cancerous tumors, but from a virulent form of acute pneumonia. My joy over this news was somewhat mitigated by my anger that a doctor would make such early, "terminal" predictions based upon "guesswork," and the three of us talked all of that through.

And then my new friend said something like, "While it was a terrible 24-hour ordeal, of staring my life and death in the face, it was also a night of discovery: of all that I have, of all that I could have, of relationships and priorities and expectations; I know now, having this second chance at my choices, that there is much that I have not recognized in my life, and there is much I want to reorder...there is much I want to be grateful for, and much I want to stop doing. It is, in fact, a sense of rebirth and new life...and I want to experience all of it in a quieter, more connected way..."

I can't think of a better hint for me and all of us than that.

HAVURAH

[from the Aramaic *chaburah*, a company of friends]

The saints arrive in ever-greater numbers, some terribly ill, some simply carrying scars of living—like you and me—some wandering for a sense of home.

We gather in the circle a couple of times each week—most of the saints have had little experience in such a process, and we struggle in various ways to determine the “way” we will sit together. “Group therapy?” “A recovery-style meeting?” “Bible reflections?” Well, those modes are available elsewhere, and we know that we must establish our *own* way of journeying together.

I gathered immense learnings during my time with Scott Peck and his Foundation for Community Encouragement: to understand that the circle must not have a single leader, but be a circle of equal leaders; that a “gatekeeper” can begin the process, and then gently interrupt it when time has run out; that probably the most beckoning of gatherings for the open invitation to intimacy is to have no official agenda or task, but simply to *be* together; that our greatest hope for the safety in which to tell our stories is to minimize control; that if we will set basic, agreed guidelines of mutual respect, then we can trust that the narrative around the circle will go where it’s supposed to for the lives of those particular participants at that particular time.

Through these sittings-in-circle, we begin to see that there are side-journeys we take as individuals, by-ways that lead to a dead-end. They are identical to those I observed (and tried myself!) in the Peck groups...those little “tricks” that we’ve learned from someone or somewhere in our lives, those defenses against intimacy that leave us still hungry for acceptance, for inclusion.

And it’s not only individuals who can struggle mightily to prevent the very thing they seek; the circle *itself* can easily become a vehicle for keeping distance between fellow-pilgrims, especially when we “conspire” to seek absolute conclusions and/or easy answers and/or the “what-you-should-do-in-this-situation” of life.

The added burden, but joy, of this risky business is that the circle constantly changes: as opposed to the organized-membership and/or the agenda-driven group, any pilgrim who walks through the door—who agrees to the basic agreements on respect—is welcome to sit with us. The burden entails, of course, the common fears of having an “enemy” show up, or encountering someone who reminds us of someone else we don’t like, or internally pouting because our best friend isn’t in attendance...or a myriad of other fears related to that universal desire: *control*. That passion for control in the circle can so easily reflect the similarity in other relationships, especially in marriages: if I can only “fix” this other person (make them like me), then everything will be just about perfect. The result, of course—even if we only partially succeed—is to abhor the clone we’ve created. The joy—whether we want to acknowledge it or not—comes from the very loss of that absolute control, when we allow ourselves the risk of chaos, emptying, epiphanies, discoveries, eureka’s...but only when we discover them *ourselves*, in the sacredness of the trusted circle of saints.

An added, immensely-important learning for us has been the obvious but easily-ignored truth that each person’s story is *their version* of the story; while we are called to allow the open telling of it—along with the trusted reception of it—we strive to remind ourselves that each of us edits our story, perhaps, to look like the “righteous one” or to

obtain the supposed comfort of victimhood or to “get out of the circle”—that is, to cast our struggles into other places and other times and other people, rather than to risk the healing power of breaking our self-imposed chains in the immediate circle. There is so often a palpable sense of the holy and the possible as we traverse the circle, and even in our often-mundane lives, it can be breathtaking to witness resurrection.

Yet, as Scotty Peck so simply and beautifully said, “Life is difficult.” We are led, then, to a changing/continuing consensus of what our guidelines entail in common behavior, and our present agreement is posted for all “veterans” and newcomers to consider:

We gather together in sacred *havurah* to share our lives—both struggles and joys—in the hope of clarity, of understanding more of our *own* journey. Consequently, we make an agreement in this circle of friends, an agreement which will bind our lives in a common life.

In order to feel that necessary sense of freedom in sharing, we agree to confidentiality; that is, if we speak with others about this occasion, we will speak *only* of our *own* experience, our *own* struggles, our *own* learnings about our *own* lives.

We understand that no one is *required* to speak or to “do” anything.

We agree, too, that we are not here to fix, heal, convert, change, repair, caretake or rescue anyone else—present or absent—for we each have our own road to travel toward personal clarity; we know that to “pair-up” with others, to form alliances of self-protection or mutual protection, will prevent us from perceiving that clarity.

We agree to be present to ourselves and others in the best way we can, allowing ourselves to feel our emotions, to express our real selves, to risk discomfort, to celebrate both our connections and our differences, to speak our agenda, or simply to sit in attentive silence; if we are under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, we acknowledge that we are in an altered state of consciousness, and—while welcome to sit in the circle—we agree to only listen.

We agree that we have no group agenda—unless it is clearly stated—and that our sharing comes out of the various agendas which each of us brings to this time together.

We agree that since life is a continuing journey, we are not asked to form specific conclusions, nor to determine “friends” or “enemies,” nor to assume that we have the answer for anyone else’s struggle or search; we remember, too, that those who churn up our fears or dislikes are often presenting our own shadows, and therefore they are our teachers.

We agree that we may ask each other any question, even as each of us has the right to choose to answer or not.

We agree that we need at least a basic structure in which to share, and so we will begin our time together with first-sentences (reflecting current matters in our lives); then experience a time of silence (for focus and centering), which will be broken by the word “okay”; then a time of open sharing, followed by last-sentences to end this particular meeting.

Finally, we agree to a common gratitude for those in our lives who are

willing to sit with us in our woundedness, our grief, our stories, and our joys.

Ultimately we know that none of us can gain intimacy or healing or community unless we *show up*, and that is perhaps our greatest, continuing learning about relationships and community-building: for those who commit to showing up, there are virtually endless possibilities for new life...yet we all can create our own reasons for *not* showing up, and then we can only live with the self-defeating consequences of our lonely struggles. We've seen it a thousand times in ourselves and others—and will continue to witness it—and we can only remind ourselves, almost heroically, that when we're present and committed to the journey, it can be wondrous.

PRESENT

[from Latin *praesentia*, a state of being]

People who come by or call St. Dismas House to learn more about the Community often mention, at some point in the conversation, that with all of the new AIDS work, there seems to be a great deal of “death” in this ministry—and that conclusion seems to scare off many people from proceeding to volunteer.

I usually try to emphasize that there is an abundance of LIFE, too...and it can be seen and heard and experienced on any given day, in any given moment—if we will only be open to the Grace of it all. Life is apparent in groups and one-on-one experiences; it is obvious in lives changing, goals set, steps taken, small epiphanies and large victories. I try to convey that, even in the constant turmoil of emergencies and loss and seeming setbacks, there is also a great sense of the “longitudinal” aspect of living together in community: of sticking with it, of hearing stories rehearsed, of watching lives form over a period of time, of taking time to live with each other.

It’s a gift of life that I have to personally learn over and over again: of celebrating what I/we *have*, of taking the daily gifts into my/our heart and soul, of watching and feeling the tremendous kindness offered to each other—even, sometimes, in the midst of argument and difference (maybe especially in the resolution of difference!). I so often experience much of this while we sit in sharing groups together, struggling hard in a community journey of illness or pride or sadness or utter glee. But, when I’m at least partially awake to the Spirit in and around me/us, I know the euphoria of the next knock on the door. Even as I know that the pilgrim at the door might be presenting a “problem” of AIDS or homelessness or legal problems or whatever else, I know, from hundreds of experiences here, that I/we are being presented, too, with a wonderful gift.

I never know exactly how to explain that to an “interested visitor” or to a “potential volunteer,” but I know that recently I’ve been saying, “I guess you’ll just have to come back and be with the people who come here...and then you’ll be part of it...and then you’ll know the gift that’s being offered to *you*...that perhaps *you* will be the one healed.”

I thank God and my Community for allowing *me* to come back each and every day....

COMPASSION

[from Latin *compassion*, to suffer with]

Perhaps one of the few advantages to advancing age—as in being over fifty—is that of noticing the cycles through which we pass as individuals and as a society. In other words, what’s “in” or “out,” what’s important or mundane, what’s powerful or impotent at any given time in our People-Magazine-Priorities-of-the-Year.

In the various worlds through which I “travel” in my day-to-day life—worlds like priesthood and shrinkdom and politicaldom—I hear more and more the usage of the same word: empower. It seems these days that we are either “empowering” a counseling client, or “empowering” a parochial group, or “empowering” a minority class of people. I fully understand in most of these situations that the individuals involved in the “empowering” are attempting to “help” the individual or group, but, increasingly, the whole process seems to have a (perhaps) unnoticed arrogance and condescension to it, mainly in the context that we might assume or believe that we have the power to give someone else power, without giving up some of our own.

In my dictionary, it looks something like this:

“em— to put into or on.”

“Empower: to give authority to (i.e., entitle, enable, authorize, qualify, license, accredit, commission); to give the means, ability, or opportunity to do (i.e., permit or enable).”

Now that’s all well and good in situations in which it’s clear that such a power is ours to share—such as empowering someone to be President by the casting of votes, or empowering someone to handle our legal affairs by signing a power-of-attorney. But in situations in which we are supposedly equals, in which we’re all supposed to already have the same powers, how can we empower someone else?

I have tried to look at the ministry and healings of Jesus (isn’t he supposed to be my standard of reference, my teacher, my mentor?), and it seems to me that he had a way of doing this whole process somewhat differently.

First, I think he didn’t try to be a hotshot, a guru, a “personality” or a “professional.” On many occasions, after he had been with someone in their healing, that person would say something like, “Wow, you really are amazing—I’ll bet that you’re the Son of God.” And then Jesus would respond with something that wouldn’t help his “career” at all, something like, “Well, thank you, but if you really believe that, it would probably be best to keep it to yourself...I simply am who I am...and this ability to be whole and healthy has been available to you all along.”

And secondly, but tied to the first, is the obvious sense that he tried to be “with” people instead of “at” them...he felt what they were feeling...and he showed it. When he “healed” someone, he was as involved as they were, not by sitting across the room tossing truisms and aphorisms and political pointers, but by getting “messy” and agitated and “empowered” himself: take a look at the spit-n-mud healing of the blind man...or the Syro-Phoenician woman...or the incident of the woman caught in adultery—you can feel his heart beating fast, you can feel his com-*passion* (“suffering with”), you can feel his own past experiences flooding his heart and soul, attempting to make some sense out of all the non-sense! He wasn’t being calm, cool, and collected in the hundreds of healings or teachings or story-tellings or sermons or observations...in fact, on several occasions he

wept...or yelled...or got angry...or laughed.

And he didn't "empower" people by keeping his distance, by dispassionately pointing to psycho-social or political paradigms, by hiring himself out as the expert-in-personal-interaction or political action; instead, he lived and worked and ate and slept and talked and listened and suffered with the people. And so their issues were his issues...and vice-versa. In fact, he was *so* involved that his "enemies" charged him with gluttony, public intoxication, consorting with whores, and all the rest!

So what?

So...if we're going to "help" minorities (or others) to get some power, perhaps we ought to acknowledge that they already have the power...and maybe we're the ones in the way of their exercising it. Maybe before we "expert" them with our haughty observations, we ought to take a hard and fast look at how we've used power ourselves (could that be why "they" feel they have no power?). Maybe before we give pointers on "empowerment" from the white side of town, we need to ask why there *is* a white side of town...and what that says about "our" use of power. Maybe we need to say something like, "Wow, if you browns and blacks and yellows and reds have put up with this empoverishment (the word just before 'empowerment' in the dictionary!) for so long, maybe you have a power of character and strength that we need to learn from you!"

Maybe the ultimate way of "empowering" any "empoverished" people is to live with them, work with them, go to school with them, celebrate common lives and neighborhoods and worship and failures and successes with them. Maybe, in that process, we'll come to know the shared joy of shared power rather than "assigned" power. And maybe when we're sitting in counseling offices with those who are feeling dis-eased, we need to acknowledge our own dis-ease...and therefore share that holy moment, knowing that we are, finally, members one of another.

You know, just like the Nazarene did.

And maybe when we're playing shrink or priest or politician or super-careerist-professional—eager to show the "least" what they can learn from the "best," when we're most eager to give pointers and "leadership" on what "they" can learn from "us" about power and wholeness...well, maybe we need to remember the Anointed One's exclamation mark on the assumption of arrogance and power-tripping and professionalism: "The last shall be first...and the first shall be last."

Or maybe, deep down inside, we believe that he just didn't know what he was talking about, after all.

I heard of an older woman saying to a group of volunteers who had come to work among her village, "Our first task in approaching another people—another culture, another religion—is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on the dreams of others. More serious still we may forget that God was there before our arrival."

UGLY

[from Old Norse *uggligr*, frightful...*uggr*, fear]

I wasn't prepared for them, these two "ugly" people...and yet, after all these years, they remain my companions, at least once a week.

How bizarre that two "ugly" people—whose names I have forgotten—should mentor me all these years.

I was a sophomore in college, at a university famous for its open-mindedness, its research, its sense of scholarship. What the catalogue didn't emphasize was that we were pretty much all the same: economically upper-middle-class, politically liberal-but-safe. The biggest difference was that there was a "larger-than-normal" percentage of Jewish students...but that made for plenty of friendly, mutual jokes and kidding, and we were all convinced that we were there to become America's best and brightest, certain to bring change and improvement to that newly-Kennedyesque world.

I edited the university newspaper, lettered in soccer and wrestling, acted as president of the men's dorms, and—while choosing not to officially join the Greek system—knew literally hundreds of classmates in fraternity and sorority houses...and therefore was able to travel in both the "Independent" and "Greek" worlds with acceptance and comfort. With the right clothes and the right car and the right thoughts and the right honors, I was preparing, as best I knew how, to become something "special," but I knew not what. But I did know that if I stayed in the right crowds, thinking the same thoughts, acting in the same ways...well, it would all just magically happen.

And then these two "ugly" people came crashing into my consciousness, much to my personal discomfort.

You see, the civil rights movement was coming slowly to the Midwest, mainly through newspaper and TV reports of protests and sit-ins in southern locales, places that seemed distant and foreign to what we saw around us. Somehow we managed to believe that racism and prejudice and exclusion and poverty were "out there" somewhere, in unfamiliar places which concerned us...but certainly did not directly involve us.

But these two "ugly" people, by their very presence and actions, managed to infiltrate our strong denial.

I began to notice them first in the Student Union...and what a couple they were! They sat off alone at a distant table, sipping coffee, talking with great animation and laughter...and then seemingly quiet and pensive for lengthy periods of time. They didn't seem particularly interested in the rest of us, and rarely looked at anyone else. But they were very much the *object* of conversation at many other tables, as various folks discussed how "uncool" these two were, how they wore such old, worn clothing, how they never seemed concerned about campus issues or campus politics or campus anything. People often remarked how "unattractive" these two people were...and it was finally decided that they really "deserved" each other simply because everyone decided that they couldn't possibly be attractive to anyone else: both tall and thin, both unmanicured, both disheveled, both remote, both unpopular, both an embarrassment to the campus community. It wasn't long until the descriptions of "unattractive" and "uncool" turned into the more convenient shorthand of "ugly."

At about this same time, the civil rights activity in that city kicked into a higher

gear: the passive activity of quiet protest became the more confrontative practice of almost-daily sit-ins. Suddenly, the newspaper stories of “a few discontents” leaped from the back pages to the front pages, as headlines announced that “militants” were attempting to actually sit at lunch counters and eat meals in famous restaurants which had previously served only white Americans. And just as suddenly, people were being spit on and beaten and dragged out of those restaurants, directly into waiting police wagons, driven to court and then to jail. And then, to the dismay and embarrassment of our entire university community, we began to see the faces of those two “ugly” people in the newspaper pictures...and they were the only *white* faces being dragged and arrested and jailed.

Back on campus, convocations were scheduled, discussion groups were set up, seminars were planned, all of it to “discuss” the racial situation and constitutional rights and First Amendment guarantees. We were (we convinced ourselves) terribly concerned about the continuing plight of minorities, and we were determined to talk and talk and talk until we understood everything even better.

And everyday, those “militants” and those two “ugly” people went back to more public places and sat-in...and then were dragged to buses, to court, to jail. Day after day after day.

I would occasionally see the two “ugly” people in the Union or the dining hall, each of them looking more tired, more disheveled, more pale...and less animated in their conversation...quieter now, often sitting in silence, more often than not simply sitting at a table together with their hands loosely embraced on those Formica surfaces. After a cup of coffee and a few shared-cigarettes, they would finally get up and leave, as hundreds of eyes would follow them at a derisive, whispered distance. I often wondered how they were keeping up with academics, how they were staying in school, how they maintaining their spirits, how much more weight they would lose before they would finally simply shrivel up and be blown away by the winds of social exclusion.

Deep down inside, in the infancy-murmurings of my own adult life, in those days of personal glories and strivings for acceptance, I wondered what attracted these two “ugly” people to each other in such camaraderie and acceptance and trust.

And deeper inside, in the chaos of my own formation as a person, I wondered how on earth these two “ugly,” frail, isolated, young people had garnered the guts to be doing what they were doing...as the rest of us talked and talked and talked.

The protests and sit-ins continued, along with the arrests. Every few days I saw their pictures again, each of them looking “worse,” but somehow better. Slowly, other citizens—of various races and backgrounds—joined the process and the struggle and the protests. Before long, a public accommodations ordinance was passed, guaranteeing the same rights which had ostensibly been guaranteed two hundred years earlier. “We” all felt that we had participated in an important right-of-passage in American history, and we watched with new involvement as the “movement” continued to grow and spread across the country.

To the university community’s relief, the two “ugly” people dropped out of school during the ensuing months. When their pictures appeared in later newspaper stories, they were no longer identified with the school; instead, the only students seen in metropolitan dailies were those who, in more “normal” fashion, were scoring touchdowns or being crowned homecoming queen.

I never saw the two “ugly” people in person again. I don’t know where they went or what they did. I didn’t know if they were still together, either in that city or elsewhere. I don’t know what these intervening years have brought them...whether they stayed active in the movement, whether they assimilated into the middle-class, whether they became rich and famous. I know—thirty years later—that I would not recognize them now if I saw either on the street.

Yet I know that they will always remain in my mind’s eye as my teachers, as peers who had obtained some truth and passed it on to me by their very lives and actions. I know that they portrayed some real truths—these two young, “ugly,” frail Jews—some truths that I was, ironically, hoping to learn from the Christian church. They taught me something about crucifixion being the necessary antecedent to resurrection; that taught me about the cost of commitment; they taught me early lessons about the shallow rewards of social acceptance and approval; they taught me some differences between talking and walking; they taught me some differences between neuroses and reality; they taught me differences between “thinking about issues” and “being with people”; they gave me early examples of my later understanding: after all is said and done, more is said than done; they allowed me to actually see that even in the midst of chaos and strife, it is important to quietly sit with embraced hands on Formica surfaces, to gather the strength and courage to continue on.

These lessons I easily forget or deny...and so I have to re-learn them almost daily, to reflect on all of these life-teachers I’ve had, most of whom were considered “ugly” and unacceptable and excluded.

Oh...and perhaps the most obvious thing they taught me: that after all the grants have been obtained, and all the grand plans have been forged, and all of the professionals have been called in for consultation, and all of the recruits have been properly trained, and all of the feelings have been “processed,” and all of the new titles have been assigned, and all of the bronze plaques have been mounted, that any change in our world—any real, lasting change for freedom, for deliverance, for emancipation, for equality, for justice, for new life—will happen only when one or two or ten or a thousand people gather up their courage and their guts to say simply and directly and loudly and publicly: this death has got to stop, *WE STAND RIGHT HERE FOR NEW LIFE*.

Thank you, my two frail, Jewish outcasts, for bringing some “ugliness” into my life.

UNDERSTAND

[from Old English *understanden*, to perceive]

I don't understand.
I don't understand how anyone can survive on the "minimum wage" or less.
I don't understand why 800 cats received pacemakers last year in this country, while I know so many people who can't get medicine for their children.
I don't understand how we can deny Gay people legal relationships...and *then* damn them for having intimate contact "out of wedlock."
I don't understand why "Scripture" stopped being written two thousand years ago.
I don't understand how anyone can say, "I have no sympathy for anyone who has AIDS."
I don't understand why so little is being done to prevent or treat AIDS.
I don't understand why the Church starts so many private schools.
I don't understand drive-up windows.
I don't understand why churches spend millions of dollars to build gyms.
I don't understand why football players say that God helped them win, when 40,000 kids die everyday from preventable causes.
I don't understand what Michael Jordan does with \$45,000,000+ per year; or what Oprah does with \$60,000,000, or what the "Defense" Department does with \$300,000,000,000.
I don't understand how psychotherapy got to be such Big Business.
I don't understand how the Church got to be such Big Business
I don't understand how we decided to despoil the earth.
I don't understand how a wristwatch can cost \$175,000.
I don't understand how we pay \$94 for a pair of running shoes, when the person who made them earned ten cents in total labor.
I don't understand how priests, ministers, and bishops can accept over \$100,000 in annual salary, plus perks galore.
I don't understand—in the midst of the "abortion battles"—why so many thousands of children remain un-adopted.
I don't understand why churches don't have to pay property taxes.
I don't understand why clergypeople get tax-exempt housing allowances.
I don't understand why immigration laws have become so exclusionary and punitive.
I don't understand why our work and ministry seems to scare or irritate so many people.
I don't understand why I'm *still* so naive about all this stuff.
I don't understand why people get so angry when I don't understand these things.

ASSUME

[from Latin *assumere*, take to]

After at least four decades of looking at myself—my innards and outards—I’m pretty sure that I know something pretty definite about myself: I know that the most continuous and difficult struggle I have day-to-day (and probably always will have, until my last day) is that of making assumptions. I like to convince myself, almost daily, that “Boy, you’ve finally gotten over that bad habit”...and then, *boom*, that same afternoon I’ll find myself doing it again...maybe twice or three times...and saying once again (to that tape recorder embedded in my soul), “Now look, that’s the last time I’ll ever make another assumption!”

So why do I keep doing that to myself (and others)...making assumptions, I mean? After all, I have to conclude that of the 1,786,412 assumptions I’ve made in my life (as of this afternoon), at least ninety-nine percent of them have been wrong.

Why do I do that?

Do you do it, too? (I’ll *assume* you do).

I have a couple of tentative conclusions.

First, I think that the powerful engines of assumption-making are powered by the earth’s most potent fuel: prejudice. Let’s face it, I usually don’t make assumptions out of the ethereal gases flowing about the atmosphere—I make assumptions based upon rock-solid misinformation, such as previous assumptions, unrelated information, childhood “lessons,” and all sort of gobbledygook that’s been crammed into my innards forever and ever. And lots of that “stuff” comes from even more previous assumptions that I could somehow be a better or superior person if I knew that other people weren’t living or acting quite as perfectly as I.

Are you following me on this? (I’ll assume you are).

And sometimes I’ll be so careful about not making assumptions that I’ll make an assumption about the opposite of what I might have assumed in the first place!

Why, oh why, do I (we) keep doing this craziness?

Point two: it’s lazy, easier-than-thinking behavior; it feels safe and comfy to conclude something based upon previous learnings, rather than actually seeking a conclusion that’s based on facts.

Let me give you a small-but-embarrassing example. Years ago I was working in a retail store during the Christmas holidays, and I was doing my best to be “cheery” with the customers, most of whom seemed bedraggled by the usual gift-buying chaos. So I made lots of little quips and comments, attempting to raise spirits...and most folks smiled and seemed genuinely pleased that I was giving them a bit of gentle attention in the midst of the credit-card maelstrom. And at the height of my exuberance, I enthusiastically said to a kind, young woman who was standing at the counter, “Well, it looks like you’re going to have a beautiful, holiday baby!”

And she said dourly, “I’m not pregnant.” And left the store.

So, as I melted slowly into the commercial-grade carpet, I vowed to never again assume that a pregnant-looking female was, in fact, pregnant; actually, I wandered around for several months with the opposite assumption on my mind: there were no more pregnant women on the face of the earth!

However, about nine months later (oh, the irony), I made a similar quip to another

woman...and vowed (again) not only to never, ever make another assumption...but to never utter another word to any female about pregnancy, childbirth, children, grandchildren, marriage, adoption, or family life!

That vow lasted, I think, about fourteen minutes.

And another example happened yesterday...but I have to give you a little “history” first.

Ever since I moved into this neighborhood in mid-April, I’ve heard lots of comments (from fellow white folks who occasionally drive through the area) about the house across the street. That house is a beautiful Victorian structure which was renovated several years ago as sort of an office-showplace for a local developer. When his company went into bankruptcy—and then the mortgage company went belly-up in the S&L fiasco—the property was abandoned, and then later “vandalized and stripped.” I began to notice that virtually every white person I heard this story from referred to the alleged “vandals” as “them,” as in, “then they went in and just wrecked the place!” In more and more of the conversations, I realized, through other comments, that the speakers were using “them” to refer to the local black population. As we talked, time and time again, I knew that we were making an unstated, mutual assumption that the “villains” were, once again, the poor and minority neighbors...and after too many of these “friendly” conversations with passers-through, I decided that I really didn’t want to discuss the situation with anyone else, knowing that this “community assumption” was so strong that I could not possibly offer any acceptable alternative to the prevailing assumptive racism. And that made me look long and hard, once again, at my own process of assumption-making in my own life.

But yesterday there was an interesting twist to the fable. From the abandoned house next-door to the Victorian structure—another house which had been owned and renovated by that same developer—I heard a lot of banging going on, and I went to investigate. And there before me stood a white woman who was stripping all of the old, expensive oak trim, along with the old, expensive carved-oak doors, and loading all of it into her rather nice vehicle to cart off to God-knows-where—perhaps to antique dealers or to her own home...but I won’t *assume* where.

So now I’m very tempted to tell everyone I know that both houses were stripped by “them outsiders” who came into the “poor” neighborhoods to ravage the last vestiges of community pride and beauty. But I know that such a statement would be a brutal assumption, akin to the others I had heard, meant only to perpetuate division and rancor.

Yup, this assumption-making is a tempting, lazy, and powerful process—one I know how to create and nurture—and I know that, even when it seems so “innocent” and trivial and common, it almost always demeans, dishonors, confuses, and wounds me and anyone else involved. And, of course, a process which increasingly tears apart the very fabric of our personal relationships, let alone the fabric of our society. So common, so deadly.

I wonder, often, how I—and we—will ever learn to heal and grow away from such a seductive temptation.

A day at a time, I guess.

SIMPLE

[from Latin *simplus*, one thing]

Some comments I heard recently caused me to reflect—again—on the whole issue of living in “intentional-poverty” or “intentional-simplicity.”

Over the past weeks, I have heard several Guests (folks who pass through this House on a daily basis) say things like, “It sure is clean and bright in this place” or “I really love how warm it feels in this House” or “I love the pretty pictures and the bright colors here...they make me feel happy!”

Another comment came to us second-hand from the local community, and it apparently went something like: “How can they claim they live in intentional-poverty when they have Georgia O’Keeffe and Picasso posters on the walls?”

Well, that’s a righteous question.

We need to remind ourselves everyday that we do *not* live in abject poverty—that we have only re-ordered our economic priorities...but we still have plenty to eat, paint to put on the walls, and donations of such things as pretty posters (from kindly folks) to put on the walls.

And we need to remind ourselves daily that we will stick with our original plan in opening this “private home” to the public: that we will make this place as bright and clean and joyful and hopeful as we can, even as we try to remind ourselves that intentional-poverty/simplicity means that we hope to believe in new priorities: that we don’t have to shop at the mall incessantly in order to feel “happy” or “unbored” with life; that we don’t have to constantly consume to feel good about ourselves or others; that repairing an old vehicle makes more sense than consuming a new one, that recovering a used sofa with clean (donated) muslin is a matter of joy for us all; that eating simply makes more sense to the body and the earth; that constantly seeking the “new” in order to be “exclusive” is simply a way to exclude 95% of our fellow humans...and to therefore end up alone and isolated in our deadly denial; that it’s possible to have a clean, bright, inviting environment by the use of ingenuity and elbow-grease, even in an area of town that others might deem “slumish”; that because of the constant bombardment of ads for consumerism (including “patriotic” insinuations!), we will always have to fight the tendency to live complicatedly...and we will *always* have things to learn about simplicity.

So it’s good for us to be watched and questioned about our intentions and our actions, for it allows us to review, once again, what we really believe about our place on this “fragile earth, our island home.”

OUTRAGEOUS

[from Old French *autre* and *raver*, beyond what may be]

The torture and brutal slaying of 23-year-old Nicholas Ray West here recently obviously left many of us shocked, angry, depressed, and confused. The idea that a young man would be kidnapped and killed simply because he was gay caused much of the community to face again the continuing fear of oppression and despair. At the same time, we were heartened that the sheriff's office so quickly apprehended five suspects.

It all happened so quickly in early December...and it took a few weeks for the horror of it to spread across the country, with articles in numerous national newspapers, with increasing reports in various media, with the call for a "Stop the Hate" rally here in Tyler. That rally was wonderful in its community-building, with people coming from all over this huge state, from several other states as well. The many speeches were forthright and compelling, the spirit was hopeful, the powerful declarations of "no more bashing" and "no more silence" and "no more death" were signs of courage and resolve and commitment. But it was a difficult way to go through the holidays and to begin a new year.

It reminded many of us, in too-vivid ways, what we see so much in every passing day: of outrageous prejudice, of dying patients who are blamed for having a disease, of terrible statements of ungodly wrath from too many pulpits, of frightened families who feel that their only option is to turn away or hide their dying sons and daughters, of supportive families who receive no support themselves from "friends" or neighbors or governmental agencies...and on and on and on. At one moment I find myself filled with rage at the denial and cruelty of society and "Christianity"...and in the next moment I find the connection and comfort and wisdom of a patient whose hand I am holding in solitude and grace.

I know that in three to five years, much of this terrible disease—this death-dealing infection which rarely gets mentioned in obituaries or eulogies—will be mainly in the heterosexual world, and it will bring a ghastly toll because of our continuing denial of its force. Likely, we will be less enthused then to quote derisive "scripture" or blame the tragedy on some outcast minority...perhaps we will then be able to simply *be* with people, to share their wounds with ours, able to say that the bell does, indeed, toll for all of us.

So, dear hearts, in these present days and in the future, we must gather our courage, seek our communal ties, lean on each other, remember "Damien the Leper" and other saints who give us guidance, touch each other in appreciation and connection, listen to the needs of our brothers and sisters, struggle in solidarity and hope, listen intently to the possibilities in our souls, remembering that, everyday, new witnesses to the healing presence of the Christ come through these and other doors, beckoning us to *kin*-ship.

TREASURE

[from Greek *thesaurus*, riches]

I'm often asked—both here in Tyler and in places I travel to around the country—what it is that St. Dismas House is “about.” What is it that goes on there? Who are the people who come there...and why? What are you trying to accomplish? What is it that you do?

Well...what it is we do is to *be*.

In a society that so often appears hell-bent on over-activity, cellular phones, overnight mail, and infomercials, the process of simply *being* with people somehow seems lax or sluggish or even unpatriotic...or, in our darkest whiz-bang judgments of failure: boring. For those of us who were trained early on to be over-achievers, “success-oriented,” wealth-mongers, goal-bonders, and “the best and the brightest,” it is a startling discovery (even after decades of reading the Gospel) to understand that our connections, our ministry, our humanness, our deepest sacred task is only to be with each other as our stories are rehearsed.

What we do here is to have the great honor of listening to stories of the poor and the poor in spirit...of the sick and the socially outcast...of those, often discounted by their families or society, who refuse to be imprisoned in the silence of despair and isolation—regardless of what their social or economic situation might be.

Yes, it is an honor to listen to the stories of these lives, to perceive the immense courage that abounds in the hearts of those who have been abused or abandoned or ignored or rejected...and there are times when the litany of human crimes against these people can be literally breathtaking, when we instinctively know that we are experiencing the life of a hero, of someone who consistently shouts YES! in a world of no's. And all we are asked to do is to *be*, to listen, to acknowledge, to have compassion, to perceive the connection of things in our own souls. We aren't called upon to preach great wisdom...or to offer sagacious advice...or to quote (our own) scripture; rather, we are called to simply be ourselves, as we gaze into our own demons and angels.

In the process of convening a support group last week, I watched as Michael struggled with the process of expressing his grief...grief related to the possible loss of his best friend to AIDS. During a break, we talked quietly of letting go, of allowing tears to flow, of sharing some of that immense burden with his “family members” at St. Dismas. He struggled more as the group continued, and I was proud that he did the best he could at that particular time: not fleeing the scene of discomfort, but letting others do some of his grieving with him.

The next day, I received a letter from Michael, and, after realizing that the words were about all of us—regardless of where we live or what we're grieving—I asked him if I could share it with you. He said yes. And although it was written in prose, I have taken the liberty of setting it in poetic format, for the rhythm and words demand such. I hope that you will read it slowly and intentionally...that you will bring your own life to it...that you will understand, then, what St. Dismas House is “about.”

Dear Father Tom,
Water can be many things, I suppose.
Uncharted seas at times.
This boat we're all suddenly in—

this strange history we're sailing through.
I've no sea legs this morning. No sailor's wit.
And no tears yet.
I'll drift a moment, with your indulgence.
Over the past ten years, I've cried many times about my friend.
I cried when he wrote to me of his AIDS diagnosis.
I've cried with admiration and respect for him as he moved through these
years, dealing with this disease in his
unique and wonderful way—
Not knowing, then, that the lessons were gold,
and I'd eventually be spending it on myself and many others.
I've cried on the plane, every time I flew to New Mexico,
with joy and excitement: I'm going to see Bruce!
I've cried on the plane home, too.
Will I ever see Bruce again?
A world with no Bruce in it will be far too lonely.
I've other friends—long time, dear, good friends...
I've got just the one Bruce.
No one knows me better, from the soul out to way beyond the skin.
A best friend leaves a far more painful void than I had imagined.
I remember every single moment with Bruce since we met.
And even the moments when we've lived far apart.
We've laughed with amazement
that in the twenty and some odd years of our friendship,
we've only had one argument—over a dog bone!
It lasted all of a minute...minute-and-a-half maybe.
Then we laughed *so* hard.
A dog bone still makes us laugh—
but who would know that but Bruce...or me?
That and a million other things.
I'll seem like a dated old man laughing at dog bones
when what's really left is a fragment of a friendship.
Bruce very recently made the remark to me
that if we don't hold on dearly to our humor,
then we might as well die.
And the painful bits are still there, too.
He said from living in Santa Fe he had learned
to make noises like a coyote when he was hurting, in despair
(followed by laughter as he threw his head back and howled!).
I guess I've been crying for so long
I'm afraid if I do it now he really will be gone.
The deterioration of Bruce is almost as complete as it can be.
What is holding that jewel in place is a mystery
to everyone around him right now—
including himself.
I'm afraid.

I'm afraid I won't see him again.
I'm afraid of feeling incredibly alone in the world without him.
I'm afraid of this sick feeling of grief, and what it's doing to me, too.
"Stuffing it" or not, it's still having its effect.
And I'm afraid I owe you and the group an apology.
I didn't mean to be insulting in my behavior last night.
I didn't mean to be the "family member"
who can't make it to the dinner table
(a circumstance I hope will change for me soon).
And I can't even remember if I conveyed at all
how appreciated you and that
very special group of people are to me.
St. Dismas House: a house filled with treasure.
Thank you for tolerating me while I fought my grief in your home.
Thank you for letting me drift with this pen.
I'll drift only slightly more.
Yes, there is a major bond with this disease,
and we all recognize it in one another.
Every time someone is speaking, we're all nodding yes
to all the different thoughts...
different feelings we all recognize.
I was shaking so hard when Marion added
another familiar brick
to the load I carried in with me—
and in so adding it, he also took it away.
We had new people, too, who came and enjoyed the laughter there.
I hope to become friends with them as well.
Was I wrong to avoid the painful bits for them?
Can we share that (because we already do)
when we know each other better?
If you can help my thinking on that,
I'm listening....
This must be quite enough.
Thank you, Father Tom—
but that doesn't seem grand enough....

Oh, Michael.

No, you don't owe anyone an apology. Yes, you are at the banquet table...even when absent (as is Bruce, even in Santa Fe). Yes, you are part of the treasury of St. Dismas. Thank you for giving the words which help acknowledge our Companionship...and our hope.

Brother Toby McCarroll of Starcross Community in California wrote: "In the final analysis, all we really have to share with each other is how we live."

Oh, yes.

SILENCE

[from Latin *silere*, absence of sound]

Apparently, I needed another lesson today in perceiving my own arrogance.

We had received a message from the hospital that a young man in his thirties was in the last stages of AIDS; that he likely had only a few days of life; that he had received no visitors; that he seemed increasingly withdrawn, even with his naturally introverted personality; that it might be best if we tried to spend some time with him. I learned from further questions that he is a black man...and, my information told me, he is a preacher who has not told his congregation of his specific illness.

After I shared this with Sr. Maria, she said that she would like to go along, as she felt still “unsure” of herself in some of the hospital calls...that she would like to see again how I handled matters in such a difficult situation. This, of course, triggered most of my “inner professional”: yes, indeed, I’ll not only help this gentleman with his despondency, but I’ll show this lady all of the skills obtained in Clinical Pastoral Education!

We arrive in his hospital room, introductions are exchanged, and I begin asking questions—as gently as I can—as he renders one-syllable responses. More questions and answers...and I realize that all I’m really doing is further tiring this emaciated man, who would prefer, I’m sure, to have me enact my professional skills on someone down the hall.

After a lengthy silence, during which I try to uncloak my professional tricks, I realize that all this man wants to do in his remaining hours on earth is to share his own skills, his own abilities, his own personality, his own discoveries, his own loves, his own hopes...with *someone who will be quiet and listen!*

And so I say, “Well, I guess that what we would appreciate, before we leave...if you don’t mind...would be for *you* to offer a prayer.”

That’s all it took: no great skills, except the most basic in life...to listen.

That wonderful man proceeded with a *long* prayer...a prayer that told of his life, his fears, his shame, his beliefs, his loved ones, his experiences, his sadness, his joy, his God, his expectations, his approaching death, his certainty of new life. We were now, through his dying eloquence—in a manner that was *his* mode of soulful communication—intimates. Intimates who didn’t have to be professional or conversational...simply intimates who could exchange the depth of life, knowing that the “amen!” at the end of that prayer was from the heart, rather than only the mouth.

We hugged—the three of us—and I kissed him on the cheek—and Sr. Maria and I walked the tiled corridors, as I confessed the obvious.

He died three days later. He was buried by his congregation. I offered gratitude for his time as my teacher.

MODEL

[from Latin *modus*, a measure]

It seems that every year during Lent I try to imagine what the Christ was “like” coming out of the wilderness...I wonder what he “felt like” as he emerged from his introspection, his self-examination, his contests with the voices of seduction and recruitment. As I look back on those previous perceptions, I realize that I have a continuing, core understanding of his struggle and his resolution, his excitement and his serenity, his fear and his certainty, his hesitation and his determination: I know, each year, that he emerges from the wasteland of the deathly Law into the New Land of the beckoning Spirit, even as I know that he has come to terms with the obvious fact that he will pay the ultimate price for his commitment; I know, then, that he has come to terms with himself...and I stand, once again, in awe of all that he has become.

But every year I have a slightly different image of that new/same person—depending, probably, on what I have recently experienced in my own life of his Grace and Presence. I suppose that I am affected, too, by what is swirling around in the world, whether locally or globally. As those images change from year to year, they allow me a sense of freshness in his struggle—and mine. Each and all of them seem to give me, at least for awhile, a better sense of courage in my cowardice to pass through the wilderness myself.

This Lent has brought me a new and singular image: I absolutely know that he emerged in a contentment *not* to be (as we say in these current times) “packaged.” I know, this Lent, that that was what the temptations were (and are) all about.

The “package” is ubiquitous. It beckons us on every side and front. It is the constant voice and demand for us to go back to the Law, to the “fog,” to the spiritual void of not being who and what we are called to be. The package is presented to us as the ultimate definition of security and success, for, once we are packaged, we never have to be concerned with our soulful yearnings, our connections, our pain, our struggles, our losses, our uncertainties, our Golgothas. If we are packaged (we are told in ten thousand ways), we can travel to and emerge from Jerusalem in style and satisfaction, knowing that all the right moves provided that luxurious detour around Gethsemane.

Our lives are packaged. Our “leaders” are packaged. Our families are packaged. Our churches, our political parties, our professions, our careers, our friends, our foods, our consumption, our doctrines, our haircuts, our educations, our entertainments, our music and art, our opinions, our slogans, our emotions, our addictions, our neighborhoods, our clothes...all of it and each of it neatly packaged in the netherworld of woulda-coulda-shoulda, all of it presented in tantalizing laws and ads and pressures and sermons and lectures and infomercials, declaring in cacophonous headlines: if you ain’t got the package, you ain’t got “the real thing”...and if you ain’t got “the real thing,” you ain’t gonna have a life. And then no one will want us to be king or queen—even, as Andy Warhol said, for fifteen minutes.

The irony that is discovered in the wilderness, of course, is that the package leaves us brain dead and soul dead. Seemingly secure...but dead. Dead burying the dead (and even the dead are packaged for death). The irony of the wilderness is that if we choose the courageous act of letting the package die, we might even live...that if we give up our packaged security, we might even find out what we’re really living for.

Well, damn that wilderness, anyway! Sometimes (most of the time?) brain/soul death feels pretty doggone good...’cause it’s in a warm little package. So comforting, so soothing, so easy, so foggy, so certain, so stable, so simple, so religious. So dead.

So what?

So a spiritual revolutionary burst out of the wilderness proclaiming: the wilderness is death, the Law is death, the detours are death, the security is death, the seduction is death, **THE PACKAGE IS DEATH!**

And yet we package even the Lent...even the Passion...even the “Good” Friday...even the Vigil...even...even the Easter....

But, somehow, beyond our constant efforts to package—day after day—every part of our lives, we are met suddenly unawares, groping through the fog on the road to Emmaus, on the Mondays and Tuesdays after Easter...we are met by the Stranger whom we cannot recognize (someone dying? someone desperate? someone poor? someone despairing? someone hopeful?), and we know again that the Christ is still with us in each other.

Thank you, Eternal Model, for bursting out of the wilderness unpackaged! Maybe you’re the only “real thing” we have left....

ESSENCE

[from Latin *esse*, to be]

So much has happened in the past month, I don't really know how to collect it all into adequate words of description, either intellectually or emotionally.

I know that a year ago now I was feverishly working on this House, painting and patching and nailing and hoping, wondering what on earth this place would "become"...if anything. It has, of course, "become" in a myriad of ways, each describable by whoever is involved or interested. As I suspected from the birth days of this ministry, it "becomes" most when I or we manage to get out of the way of the "becoming"—just letting people be who they are in the best way they can. Always, that is how sacredness happens, simply because it happens without plan or much forethought, when people are allowed to express themselves without fear of shaming or agenda or false-tradition getting in the way. All of it is magical and mystical to watch...and when someone asks me to give a talk on spirituality or mysticism, I find myself wanting to suggest only that, instead of planning a weekly discussion group about such subjects, they instead consider simply being with people who are struggling...or recovering...or dying...for it is in the presence of such pilgrimage that wisdom and holiness exists.

I find, too, that my language is changing—simplifying, really. My verbs and adjectives and adverbs of former days—things like "pleased" and "happy" and "impressed" and "convinced"—are turning into more ethereal concepts...and more and more I find myself saying simply that I am "honored" to be present or involved. I can't seem to find other words these days. Yes, I am honored to hear someone talk...honored to share their tears or laughter...honored to feel their pain or joy...honored to be present in their death or their rebirth. And honored, too, by the presence of so many of you, wherever you live or whatever you're doing, as we pilgrimage together, fumbling and staggering and seeking some kind of acceptance for each other in the midst of this long journey through chaos.

I remember Richard Garnett's eloquent words: "Love is God's essence; Power but his attribute; therefore is his love greater than his power." In this past week of burying fellow pilgrims—of being in the grief of funerals and the joys of wakes, of uncertainties and exhaustion, of deep tears and wondrous guffaws, of cosmic wisdom and monthly bills—I have had a profound sense of the love of God, rather than the power of God...and I do know this week that the love matters more than the power. In the powerlessness of AIDS and addictions and recovery and all the other insanities of our age and our being, all the bargaining we do for God's power seems so pathetic in the light of the love I perceive. Yes, the power is an attribute we have attached to this Parent in the midst of our own powerlessness, but it is the love that is truly the essence of things...it is the love that keeps us in any sense of sanity or courage or commitment. And it is the Parental love that transforms in and through another child of the Parent: a dying patient...or a weary volunteer...or a Companion who sends a note from hundreds of miles away. It is the love which whispers to us that we are not alone in all of this, that there are others who struggle with us in their own way. Yes, love is the essence.

So where do we go next—in the second year—on this journey together...and how will we perceive that essence in the year ahead?

I don't know...any more than I knew a year ago that there would be hundreds of

people involved with this place in these present days; any more than I expected that a small outpost in East Texas would become a place of sacredness and safety; any more than I ever imagined to know the difference between God's power and God's essence; any more than I knew that I had to get out of the way of things to let things thrive; any more than I knew that my priesthood was not a matter of official ordination but of community affirmation; any more than I knew that intentional-poverty yielded unintentional riches; any more than I knew that death can bring life as surely as life can bring death; any more than I knew that the real key to community-building is simply the common journey. What I don't know in the present, then, will give me the courage to learn more from each of you in the chaos ahead.

Through all of that, I and we must remember Dorothy Day's ageless advice to keep things *simple* (including our expectations), to stay as "dis-organized" as possible, for only in such a state will we be able to see the persons around us, only then will we be able to truly perceive the essence rather than the attributes.

EXCLUSIVE

[from Latin *excludere*, to shut out]

I keep wondering, month after month, year after year, why I don't "get it."
I really should "get it" after all these years...at least *begin* to understand some stuff about "how things operate."

But this is part of what I don't get: Why are things so *bizarre*?

Like last month. I announced that we were going to go full-tilt into developing more housing possibilities for people-living-with-AIDS here at St. Dismas House...and I asked for some help in obtaining beds, chests, lamps, etc., etc. And some really caring and committed folks called up and said they'd try to help...and some did...you know, the folks who always call up or show up to offer a hand or a donation or whatever-they-got-to-give; I know that life would be a lot tougher without them.

But, then, a whole lot of folks *didn't*.

Hmmm.

This is what I don't get. I mean with all this Christianity flowing ceaselessly throughout the bible belt, why is it such a chore to get a few beds and chests...or even a few bed sheets that don't look like they've been through World War III?

I don't get it. I got thinking of a local congregation that spent a bunch of its bucks (and most of its energy) last year putting in a new organ. Now they're singin' and a dancin' and a whoopin' to Jesus. That's nice.

Then I got thinking of another local church that recently raised almost a half-million buckeroos to buy new carpeting and tuckpoint their brick and get some fancy audio-visual equipment. Now they're tuckpointing for Jesus. That's nice.

Then I got thinking about yet another church that sent one of their assistant pastors (and his wife, of course) to the Soviet Union just to sorta see if anybody over there needed some soul-savin'. At seven thousand bucks each (round trip, of course, with all airport transfers included). Now they're showing slides for Jesus. That's nice.

But then I got thinking of another church that popped about a million smackers for a swell new gym for Christians (only), with workout machines and stepping machines and Jacuzzi baths and all that other Christian (only) stuff. Now they're pumpin' iron for Jesus. That's nice.

And doggonit, that got me thinking of yet another church that's spending an avalanche of mammon to build one of these fancy, exclusive schools for Christians (only), so those kids won't have to hear words like "condom" or "sex education" (bet you never saw those words in the Bible, did ya?). Now they're being pure and exclusive and homogeneous for Jesus. That's nice.

And then, to top it all off, a large congregation is starting to draw plans for the biggest damn "sanctuary" building that anyone's *ever* seen in these parts, even in this State of big-envy. That's nice.

But what I don't get is this: if all of us nice Christian (only) folks are whoopin' and tuckpointing and slide-showing and pumpin' iron and exclusivizing and outbuilding for Jesus...then why on earth is it so hard to get a few beds and chests and lamps for some folks who are infected and suffering with a terminal disease?

If anybody has all of this figured out, please drop me a line, 'cause I got to *start* "gettin' it" pretty soon...and the years are running out pretty fast!

Of course, I don't really know what I'd do with it if I did "get it."

WORTHY

[from Old English *weorth*, to have value]

Oftentimes, we will find food on the doorstep, food that's been donated by various people around town as a sign of support and encouragement for this ministry. Sometimes the arrival of such gifts—of fruit and vegetables and baked goods and canned goods—will be announced, and sometimes it will simply appear, anonymous and graceful. As I am fortunate to consistently have enough food to eat, I always take such largesse to houses around the neighborhoods nearby, places which I have noticed during my daily jogging as homes filled with lots of kids, or places occupied by only one elderly person. Invariably, the residents and I have a brief conversation, telling each other who we are, what's going on, and so forth. I tell them, too, that the food is not from me, but from other people who wish to share with them as best they can. Most of the time, this feels like a “meal” to me, that although the food is not eaten together, we do have a conversation over it, and the presence of the donors is somehow felt at the “table,” too.

Recently, while driving my car through the neighborhoods, looking for those houses where the food might be particularly appropriate, I noticed a group of men—probably seven in number, of various ages—and one young woman all sitting together on a front porch; I noticed, too, that at their feet lay several cans of beer and a couple of empty whiskey bottles. In the ensuing seconds of time, in what seemed like hyper-speed, all sorts of things traveled through my brain: “a bunch of drunks”...“why should I help those who aren't helping themselves” ...“think of all the neighbors who really need this food” ...“those kids down the block surely deserve this stuff more than this crowd does” ...“and, besides, think of the pleasant conversation you'll have down the street...”

And then something else zoomed into my consciousness: a poster I've been working on that says something like: He reminded us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned...He didn't say, “But only if you think they deserve it...”

And so, in a moment's time, I found myself slamming on the brakes, backing up, getting out, opening the rear hatch, approaching the group, mentioning the food, asking if they wished to have it.

All but the young woman were drunk.

Some smiled and said yes. Some were belligerent and wanted to know what the “catch” was. One was totally incoherent.

Much of my past “training” welled up within me: wanting to make them “deserving” of help; wanting to mention AA or some other helpful program; wanting to tell them about St. Dismas House...and me...and hope.

But, somehow, I remembered that the food was freely given to me...and so it needed to be freely given to others, as a sacrament of the “deservedness” of each of us.

Shut up, Father Tom. Just pass the sacrament to the next person, saying “Receive the Christ who lives within you.”

Some of them, in their own way, said Amen.

Others didn't.

And as I passed another kid-filled house on the way home, I struggled again with my priorities, my past, my “requirements” for the children of God, my ego, my needs.

And I struggled all week...and I struggle even in this present moment.

But, for a brief moment in time, I lived my poster, I lived my shaky recent belief.

And I know, again, that I have so much more to learn.

RELIGIOUS

[from Latin *religio*, connected again]

[A story, punctuated by real life in the form of various letters, phone calls, and miscellany....]

A Well-Known Religious Person stood up and asked the Teacher a rhetorical question (meaning, of course, that he already knew what the answer was “supposed” to be...and likely knew that the Teacher was going to give the “wrong” answer): “Teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?”

[“...Could you send someone over here to my apartment...My legs have given out again, and I’m really in a bind....”]

And the Teacher said to him, “What is written in the Law?”

And the Well-Known Religious Person said, “It is clear what is written in the Religious Law: ‘You shall love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

And the Teacher said, “Yes, that is correct. Do that and you will live.”

[“No, I’m not infected with anything...I just heard about this place...and I have a feeling that I don’t want to go on living unless I can find a community somewhere...so what do I have to do to become a ‘member’ here?”]

And the Well-Known Religious Person said, “But who is my neighbor?”

And the Teacher said, “Well, consider this: A certain man—who happened to be infected with HIV/AIDS was traveling from one town to another in East Texas, trying to find a place to live and food to eat and a community to be a part of (for he had been illegally fired from his previous employment because someone discovered that he was infected—but he didn’t have the funds to hire a lawyer to fight the illegal firing, and he really didn’t quite know who to ask for help...and suddenly he was without rent money or food money or gas money or any money); and while he was traveling through a small town in East Texas, some folks drove by him and yelled things at him, screaming that he was a ‘bum’ and worthless and so on. But the man kept on along that road with his eyes staring at the gravel he was walking, and, suddenly, the car turned around and approached him at a high rate of speed, trying to run him over. And the man jumped out of the way, fell into a ditch, and was knocked out. And while he was lying there, the occupants of the car jumped out, beat him severely, stripped him of his wallet (which held only his identification) and took his watch and his shoes. And the man was lying there in the ditch in East Texas, half-dead.

[“This is a message for anyone there...I’m the hospice chaplain in the area south of Tyler...just wanted you folks to know that your friend Dorothy died during the night....”]

“And soon thereafter, a Well-Known Religious Person happened to be going down that same road, and he saw the man lying in the ditch half-dead, and he slowed down for a moment...and then he sped up again, realizing that he was already a bit late to the meeting of Well-Known Religious Persons in the next town.

[“...That sure was a wonderful story on TV and in the paper about the work y’all are doing there at St. Dismas House...you know, with the AIDS children and their families and so forth...But you know, after seeing all of that, I called my district manager,

and I think we may have to increase your insurance premium so our risk isn't quite so heavy...."]

“And not long afterward, a very Well-Known and Revered Preacher was driving down that same road in his very new 1995 Super Polluter automobile, when he, too, noticed the man lying half-dead in the ditch and slowed down for a moment...but he remembered that he was somewhat late to the Prayer Breakfast that he was leading in the next town...and so he rushed ahead.

[“I know I'm getting worse...just tell me that I won't die alone....”]

“And after quite some time had passed, another man—himself recently rendered unemployed by his national corporation (which was going through what they told him was a ‘down-sizing’) and who was well-known only because of his unpopular political and spiritual ideas—happened by that road, saw the other man lying half-dead in the ditch, felt filled with compassion by such a pathetic sight, and pulled off on the shoulder; he got out of his car, jumped down into the ditch, tended to the man’s wounds as best he could, and asked him what had happened. After waiting a long time to hear the story told (including that the man was infected, and had no money or health insurance), he decided that the least he could do was to find this beaten man a place to stay while he healed.

[“I just talked with a friend of mine who manages a furniture store, and they would like to offer four brand new twin beds for the House—you know, for the homeless who might be sick.”]

“So he took the man to a local motel, but when the manager saw the condition of the beaten man, he suggested that maybe the local shelter was more appropriate. And so he took the beaten man to a local shelter, but when the kind folks there learned that the man was infected, they pointed out that their hands were tied because, if they helped this man, they might be considered a Special Care Facility for AIDS patients...and they simply couldn't risk the legal ramifications. The man said he understood.

[“I just sold my home and wanted to share (some of the enclosed proceeds) with you—I do believe in the ministry...and pray you can continue in this work. I like the idea of a ‘no frills’ ministry—just service and love...this is what it's all about!!”]

“And so the man was faced with the dilemma of neighborliness...of servanthood...of understanding, in a concrete situation, the true meaning of living life to its fullest. And as he thought more about this, he suddenly remembered that compassion literally meant ‘to suffer with’...and he remembered that he had friends who were compassionate, too...and he remembered that he had a guest bedroom in his house...and he knew, regardless of all the NO's in the world, that he could say YES if he wished to. And so he took the half-dead man home with him...and he called some friends to help him...and the half-dead man stayed there until he felt alive again.”

[“Hi...this is Karen...I'm fine...I just wanted to tell you that our dear friend who recently died of AIDS had four nice chests of drawers in his apartment, and we think he would have been honored if they were used for folks at St. Dismas House...so we're loading them up and bringing them over....”]

The Teacher and the Well-Known Religious Person stared at each other for several moments.

[“Director/Administrator, Saint Dismas House:

We have been informed that your business may be providing special care facility services at this address...If your business provides special care facility services as

defined by the Health and Safety Code Act, then a special care license is required. If you are providing services, you must cease and desist until a special care facility license is issued. Please...submit the application...with the non-refundable license fee...not less than \$200 or more than \$1,000...within 10 days...and please submit all written documentation within ten days...Department of Health, Licensing Division.”]

“Which of these people,” the Teacher then asked the Well-Known Religious Person, “turned out to be a neighbor to the half-dead man?”

And the Well-Known Religious Person, who had become caught up in the compassionate nature of the story instead of the mere words of the Law, answered, “The one who treated him with mercy, regardless of the personal cost.”

[“TO: Texas Department of Health, Licensing Division:

“I was surprised to receive your letter. Make that surprised and confused, especially by your opening line: ‘We have been informed that your business may be providing special care facility services at (your) address.’ I don’t know who contacted you about our activities here (although I could make a reasoned guess), but I do know that they do not understand our presence or mission.

“For starters (in no logical sequence, of course):

“St. Dismas House is not that ‘thing’ described in Sec. 248.002(8). St. Dismas is a monastic house of hospitality, welcoming any person who comes to the front door, in the spirit of the Christ (see the Gospel according to St. Matthew), of the Rule of St. Benedict (composed 540 AD), and of the spirit of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement.

“St. Dismas House is my private residence in the ‘poor section’ of Tyler; as an Episcopal priest (for three decades), I choose to make it open to any and all children of God who wished to be here for their own reasons.

“Some of the people who come to this sacred and safe place are straight, some are gay; some tell me that they are HIV/AIDS infected, some tell me they are not; most people here are poor; some are fairly wealthy; some are homeless; some have been raped or beaten or ripped-off; some are drug-dependent, some are in recovery; most are struggling with something, and seek only a quiet, safe place to be for awhile, whether for ten minutes or an hour or a day or much longer. I and Companions try to welcome them as best we can...and then simply ‘sit’ with them (as our Buddhist friends would say).

“I/we are not an institution. There is no Director/Administrator, for we try to struggle situationally, rather than direct or administrate. This place is disorganized, and will remain so, I hope.

“I—and others—live in intentional poverty, and receive no salary or ‘benefits.’ There are no employees here. There is no “program“; we celebrate the Eucharist together, we pray together, folks often stop by to eat a meal here, and we sit around and talk a few times each week...that is, anyone who wishes to, for whatever reason.

“If we hear of someone who wants a visitor in the hospital, I and others go; some we visit have AIDS, some have cancer, some have simply ‘old age.’ I and others visit people in their homes when they ask us to. We go to a facility for adolescent addicts and share the Eucharist.

“There are no doctors or nurses working here. I have doctor friends and nurse friends...and painter friends and plumber friends and unemployed friends; some of all of the above are AIDS infected; most are not.

“Each month, several hundred people come through this House. For several hundred different reasons.

“We have no medicines that we dispense, for we are neither medical doctors nor pharmacists.

“Neither I nor this place is a business.

“There are individuals and institutions in Tyler and East Texas who do not want such a place as this to exist (perhaps it was probably one of them who contacted you); on the other hand, there are lots of people who do want this open, ecumenical, safe, sacred place to go to for whatever reason. The means of admission is a knock on the door; it is not an HIV/AIDS diagnosis nor a freedom from AIDS infection.

“We have no budget. We neither ask for nor receive any ‘grants’ or funding from the Church, from the federal government or from the Texas State government. We have no ‘clients.’

“We have no ‘guidelines’ except what we perceive from the Gospel.

“By my own choice, I usually work seven days a week, often fifteen hours each day...and I am wonderfully fortunate to have local friends who work with me—just as hard—in their own servanthood to others. We have no interest in being organized, institutionalized, departmentalized, canonized, nationalized, or any other ‘ized.’

“In the spirit of those I am honored to be with, and in the context of my priestly vows, I shall continue to invite people into my private residence, and I shall continue to be gifted by their presence. I shall continue to try to be of any help I can, regardless of folks’ condition, their life expectancy, their wounds, their hopes, or their reasons. Simply because that was the Model offered to us.

“Your own Department asked me last month if I would accept designation as an ‘Advocate’ for AIDS patients in East Texas; I agreed to that, and we will be honored to do so, if we can be of any help. However, I do not believe that I need further licensing to be a priest, a caring human being, or a fellow pilgrim of those who suffer. Nor do I believe that I need further licensing to declare my home a monastic house of hospitality.

“In closing, allow me to offer you the same invitation I/we offer to all people, however imperfectly: We offer hospitality to all people who seek peace, community, and hope. We wish to offer servanthood, rather than judgment or expectations. We wish to honor the holy aspect of each child of God, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, race, economic circumstances, or sexual orientation. We wish to learn from those who choose to be in this place. We wish to receive you as the Christ, for the Christ often comes in the stranger’s guise....

“May your own servanthood continue to bring you joy and Grace.”]

And the Teacher said, “Go, then...and do as he did.”

MOMENT

[from Latin *momentum*, *movere*, to move]

I have come to believe—and at least *partially* understand—that in any given moment there can only be that explosion of what we call “Grace”—moments when birth and death are so much the same thing that we somehow give up, even for a millisecond, what we have been told to believe about such awesome issues...and then, perhaps if we are awake enough, we learn more about ourselves, about life, about Grace.

I experience so many of those moments in the life of this place.

Have I always been just too busy or blind to see them—the stark nature and presence of them—or are they simply more obvious now? Perhaps I *am* waking up occasionally.

Yes, there are moments.

There was the moment last week when the fragile rape victim sat on the sofa, bent over in such a sculpture of despair that her tears fell directly to the carpet, leaving tiny spots of holy water in a room which has been increasingly christened with such blessedness. And I sat with her in the death-throes of innocence and safety, of terror and unspeakable invasion, as she rehearsed the moments of attack, of isolation, of pleas for help which went unheard or coldly ignored. I sat with her during the recounting of sudden new waves of misplaced shame and guilt and revulsion and isolation. No, no, no, *NO!*—I DON’T WANT TO SPEAK OR REMEMBER ALL OF THAT! Yes, gentle heart, we must speak of death and terror—of the abduction, the-gun-to-the-throat, the coldness of the ground, the unanswered screams, the relentless aloneness—so that we will know the real demons and pain from the false ones you are creating in your soul. If we can trust each other enough to name the horror and death, then perhaps we can trust each other enough to know the rebirth and resurrection when we see it. Slowly, we rehearse. Slowly, the life-after-rape may begin with some sense of healing. Oh my. Can I *really* know what she’s feeling? Can I, as a male who’s never been attacked that way, really know? Slowly, counting the moments with her, perhaps I can just offer a sense of safety—in this room and in the emergency room—so that she’ll know less of the shame and more of the hope. Slow, painstaking moments. Right now, we can only sit together in the death/birth of it. Oh my.

Yes, there are moments.

There was the moment at the beginning of “The Prayers of the People.” I had traveled almost fifty miles on that Sunday morning a couple of weeks ago to celebrate the Eucharist with a group of adolescent addicts/alcoholics at a treatment facility. It was the first time in this particular facility that anyone had allowed a “religious service” to be a part of the treatment plan, and I arrived there with no expectations of what might happen. Or if anyone would show up.

I stood for a while in the back of the room as the AA meeting was progressing, as 13-, 14-, and 15-year-olds acknowledged their disease and their drugs of choice, as each of them announced their goals for the day. The monotonous litanies brought despair into my heart, as I listened to the vanished dreams of what-might-have-been in these young, young voices, and I felt like I was in a chamber of death. Quietly and slowly the meeting adjourned, and nervously the fourteen of us eyed each other, put chairs into a smaller circle, and started to wonder if this was such a good idea after all.

I knew that I couldn't begin the "Mass" in the usual fashion (how do you spout such declarative affirmations in the midst of such uncertainty?), and I found myself saying, abruptly, "I am Father Tom, I'm in my fifties, and I learned well how to be addicted to control...and I'm trying to recover." Their eyes flashed with recognition of such death-in-life, and so I was encouraged to proceed. But knowing that unfamiliar groups of people rarely offer their prayerful petitions out loud, I expected depths of silence as I announced that we would offer our Prayers of the People *together*. And there was silence...so I offered a petition of my own, asking them to pray for a young man who had just died of AIDS. And more silence...moments and moments of silence.

Then a young man broke through the chasm of death and asked us to pray for his mother whom he missed. And then an avalanche. Petitions for recovery, petitions for frailties, petitions for amends, petitions for new life...and then a petition by a staff member who asked us to remember the child she had lost...followed by thanksgivings for treatment, for hope, for rebirth, for being-able-to-go-to-church-without-being-shamed. Such a moment of Grace. I knew that death and birth had come together in the passing of the Bread, in the hugs, in the tears, in the laughter. And I knew that we would be going back there on the next Sunday morning and for many more Sunday mornings...and I knew that this group of courageous child/adults had become part of the St. Dismas community. And that this was a new aspect of our ministry. Oh my.

Yes, there are moments.

There was the moment in the film *Schindler's List* when conman-cum-saint Oskar Schindler is talking to the death-camp commandant about the meaning of power...a moment so complete in its words and truth that I realized that all of Lent and Easter, all of death and birth, all of wilderness and promised-land had converged into a soliloquy of resurrection...and I knew that scripture is still being written, that I had been given another momentary gaze through the window of Grace. True power, he seemed to say, is when you have the "power" to destroy...and you choose *not* to. To hear the words, to see the struggle for re-birth which the commandant experienced, to know again that birth is always a matter of choice...oh, my.

Yes, there are moments.

When you and I are awake enough.

When death and birth come together in a defining glimpse of eternity.

And we are never the same....

And we are therefore blessed.

Yes, there are moments.

SPIRIT

[from Latin *spiritus*, breath]

A question I receive a lot is: “How do you possibly keep your own spirits up when you’re dealing with so much poverty and sadness and sickness and death in the work at St. Dismas House?” That question is typically followed by a statement: “I just don’t understand how you do it...” In virtually every case, I know that in both the question and the statement there is a real sense of support and empathy and encouragement from the speaker. And, ironically, that sense of connection and hope from the speaker is a vital part of the answer I might give.

When I’m feeling especially expansive and loquacious, I might answer the question with some allusion to community and reciprocal ministry and scriptural precedent. But all of that is usually me saying too much about something that’s almost impossible to explain in words...so I use too many words in frustration. It’s really a lot simpler than speeches or lengthy descriptions. It’s as simple as the Christmas “story” we tell each other every year: it’s as simple as looking around—in at least a partially-wakeful state—and trying to recognize Grace as it swirls around us.

In a general sense, I find it pretty easy, really, to “keep my spirits up” in all of the chaos here. I am able, somehow on most days, to perceive and feel that I am truly receiving an *immense* amount of love and affection and “connectedness” from those around me. In the seeming devastation of poverty and sicknesses, I concentrate on what I *have* with each person, rather than what I don’t have. From a hug or a look or a faint smile or a tear, I know that I have been given someone to be with, to hold onto, to share all the good and bad stuff with. I do not believe that there is any more that I can possibly ask for in this present world than that—and, in fact, I almost pity anyone else who is not experiencing that same kind of intense “living” with others. For me, all of it is part of that same holyday story: looking around the “stable,” acknowledging the joy and the pain of life, staring into the eyes of Hope, and simply murmuring, “Wow.”

And then there’s the matter of the silly little things I occasionally allow myself to really see...the things that, if I will truly notice them, will convince me that my spirits are given gifts every single day of the year, Christmas or not.

Things like the messy little chocolate spot.

What messy little chocolate spot?

Well, it happened this way: recently, I was sitting at this computer doing something that I thought to be terribly important. Something “professional” and “adult” and “serious” and “urgent.” And who should wander into my office but this gorgeous little five-year-old black girl...a girl who just happens to be HIV infected. There have been times, of course, when she’s sat in my lap in the living room or kitchen or back deck, when we’ve acted silly, when she’s drawn me a picture of brother or sister. Or we’ve been together with lots of siblings and cousins and St. Dismas volunteers at McDonald’s or at a homegrown birthday party. But then she or we would be gone, and I’d carry her around in my gut for several days, wondering off and on about a future illness or whatever.

But this day, she was in my office for the first time, and her eyes widened with excitement when she saw the computer screen. So—*bam*—she was in my lap, asking me questions, begging me to show her something new and exciting in this technological

wonderland. Quickly, I grabbed the mouse and began “pulling down” the various menus on the screen: file/edit/format/custom/font/size/style/view...and just as quickly, her eyes darted from image to image, fascination brewing in that gorgeous brain. And before I could try to dazzle her further, she grabbed at the mouse, said, “Me too,” and proceeded, without further instruction, to pull down the same menus in sequence—bam, bam, bam—and smiled one of the great smiles on the planet Earth, as she sat in deep self-satisfaction. After a bit more banter, I created her name in LARGE letters, with a fancy type style, and printed it out for her. She clutched the paper with absolute ownership, and promptly marched back to the living room, to other friends, to nurses, to caseworkers, to the rest of her young life.

As usual, I sat for a moment in quietness, wondering how much time she had left (no, wondering how much time I had left with her). My hand almost automatically went back to the mouse, to get on with whatever I thought was professional-adult-serious-urgent—only to discover that the mouse had this messy little chocolate spot on it, a leftover from a little girl who had recently enjoyed several Tootsie Rolls from the living room bowl. Part of that chocolate spot came off on my hand—and the next two things I did may sound pretty crazy for a professional-adult-serious-urgent person to do...and I hesitate to put them on paper for public scrutiny...but here goes: first, instead of wiping the chocolate off my hand with a nearby tissue (as a low-spirited-professional-adult-serious-urgent person should do), I put my hand to my mouth and savored that messy little chocolate spot (is this what the *Book of Common Prayer* means by “an outward and visible sign of an inner and spiritual grace”?); and then, even crazier, I left the rest of the messy little chocolate spot on my computer mouse...and every day, day after day, I could feel it, sticking just a tiny bit to the bottom of my palm as I manipulated the mouse. And every day I thought of her...and how much joy she brings me...and how I don’t have one bit of control over how long she (or I) will live, just as, in the “stable” in the “story” long ago, no one had one bit of control over what this Babe would become or how he would “end up.” Yesterday, the last bit of messy chocolate vanished from my computer mouse...but somewhere in this House, some bit of Grace is waiting for me, if I will only see.

Only the moment. Only the chance to extend, even briefly, the moment. Only seeing—blindly sometimes—the Grace, the joy, the connectedness of messy little chocolate spots. Only knowing, however imperfectly, that my spirits are elevated in the love and attention of a little girl who will die someday, just as I will. Only knowing, as I gaze around this “stable,” that the Christ is brought to me in all days...and in the midst of poverty and hospital beds and birthday parties and ICU and emergency rooms and support groups and “stables” of New Birth...I can only look around and murmur “Wow.”

A Catholic Worker once said to Parker Palmer, "The thing you don't understand is that just because something is impossible doesn't mean you shouldn't do it."

Yeah, that’s how I keep my spirits up.

(And I know you won’t tell anyone what I did with the messy little chocolate spot.).

MYSTERY

[from Greek *musterion*, secret rite]

I get a lot of questions about death and grieving. As we all know, it's not a very popular subject in this youth-oriented culture, but it's virtually impossible to ignore in this work and ministry. I'm supposed to "know" about such things—the process, the "afterlife," the *meaning* of it all. In previous places and ministries of quiet piety, I knew that I was supposed to quote scripture or Church tradition ("The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," etcetera) to comfort folks, but here, there is simply too much of it to ignore the underlying, demanding question: "Father, what's going to happen to me when *I* die?"

I'm not so sure I know much of anything about the afterlife. Yes, I have glimmerings of it, as we all do now and then, and I continue to ponder it as a mystery, much as I perceive God to be a mystery. By "mystery" I mean something unknown to me, something I have a sense of, but can put no exact experience to, simply because it is on a different plane than mine. I read, I listen, I try to understand...and yet acknowledge that there are certain things that I cannot know until I'm ready...and perhaps I will be ready when my "earthiness" has let go, and I can appreciate the matter of not being tied to the mundane "stuff" of this life.

A couple of sources, though:

I read Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' *Life After Death* last year, and I found it wonderfully helpful in allowing me to imagine beyond my own tethers of logic—it gave me a sense of other people's experience, and, hence, I had a community of imagination in which to drift through the process. I think, too, that Dr. Kubler-Ross is a tremendously courageous physician, counselor, and human being for taking the kind of risks she does.

All of that reminds me of the other source, from my own memory. I had the honor once, while in seminary, to hear the famous/infamous Bishop James Pike of California preach in a huge church in Washington, D.C. Bishop Pike chose to speak of death and afterlife that day during Lent, and there was absolute silence in that packed place as he magnificently described death as a *release*...and the afterlife as this almost-cosmic explosion of the soul into oneness with the Eternal.

I remember the moment he said, "And the soul goes *whoooosh* into the cosmos, into the Eternal, into the endless time and space of freedom and completeness...no more bindings to the face of the earth, to pain, to blindness, to limitations..." If those weren't his exact words, they were the words I heard in my soul, as I sat there knowing that my own father was dying in a hospital hundreds of miles away. And those words were a comfort on many other occasions when a friend or relative would loose their own bounds.

You see, those words not only gave me a sense of the Eternal, but also a sense of the present: that those spirits, which likely soar into Oneness, are now in a new and special and personal relationship with me. By their unbridled eternalness, they are with me still, in a way that I cannot fully understand until I experience that Oneness.

That's why, by the way, that I don't "believe" in "hell." From all of that listening and reading and pondering, my own soul somehow knows that if even one soul has *whooshed* into Eternity, then all souls experience the same...or otherwise there would be no Oneness.

I think that we are in the process, continually, of dying, although it's an unsettling thought and feeling while we're exuding youth and vitality. It's a process that lasts

through our entire lives, not just in a last few moments or hours or days. I think we know, in that wondrous ending—I think we can see *clearer* in the end, perhaps—that we have been graced and loved and needed and appreciated and unique.

Ours—in the living and grieving of dear hearts—is the more difficult, earth-bound process: to struggle, to remember, to wail, to dance, to celebrate, to stay in contact with those we ostensibly “lose.” When friends and Companions speak to me of loved ones who have died, I often ask, “And how often do you speak with them?” I am given a blank and silent stare...and then, more often than not, a smile begins to form on the person’s face, as they begin to truly know what I am talking about...and they re-animate that dialogue which has been absent for too long.

Oftentimes, too, I suggest that a person erect a “shrine” in their home for the person who has died—a sacred place somewhere in a living room or bedroom, where pictures and/or mementos can be placed for a month or so, where candles can be lighted, where daily prayers of thanks and gratitude can be said, perhaps with friends or family members present. And then the disassembling of the shrine, when it’s time, to remind ourselves that our life will go on, yet with these wondrous memories carried in our hearts and souls.

No, I’m not so sure I “know” much about the ultimate meaning or process of final death, but I have some hints about the preparation...and remembrance...of it.

ALLOW

[derivation of Latin *adlocare*, to place, and *allaudare*, to praise]

In the flurry that we call “AIDS Clinic Day,” there were too many people coming and going...too many forms being filled out...too much noise—from laughter and story-telling, thank God—to hear much of anything...too many questions...too few answers...too little coffee...too many phone calls from too many other places...and so I alternately stood and sat in my office, trying to “get things done” and “hide out,” both at the same time. All I know is that I felt *harried*.

Suddenly...somewhat hesitantly...a woman appears in front of me, wishing, she says, to talk for a moment or two. “But I don’t have time or energy for this right now,” I say to myself, not to her. Whatever it is, I want to put it off, find another time, seek some temporary peace and quiet. But I make the mistake of glancing into her eyes, and what I see there bespeaks—beyond her respectful and pleasant manner—only one thing: RIGHT NOW. “Okay,” I say for what reason I’m not sure, “let’s sit together for a while.”

I hear the story of a woman who has lost her three-week-old son to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome only two weeks before. I hear of skirmishes with health officials and funeral directors who don’t want to hear of her hopes for a “natural burial” in south Texas, of her transporting the child herself to a suitable grave near family and friends, of continuous grieving, of questions about grieving, of strange looks and rejection when she goes to social service agencies to ask if she might be allowed to hold an infant for awhile, of despair and anger and heartbreak...and, finally, of “Is this a place where I could just *be* for awhile?”

In our own distinctive ways, we each cried our own grieving—one of SIDS, one of friends struggling through AIDS. I realized, in a moment’s time of the heart, that this woman—with whom I really didn’t want to be “bothered” in my own caretaking of others—was offering her own heart and soul—her own *open* grieving—to all of us who didn’t even want to admit that we *were* grieving. I knew that this offer—and her very person—was powerful medicine...to her, to me, to all of us.

I asked her to come back and just *be* with folks, to help out in ways that made sense to her. She has. Over and over. And now she’s a part of all of us...still grieving—causing us to look at *our* own process—yet now laughing, telling stories, living craziness, trying to make sense out of nonsense...allowing life to happen in the midst of chaos. Allowing, too, that feeling that I saw in her eyes that very first day: that maybe, as she says, we might just “grow old together.”

Her first words to me, I think, were “Hi, I’m Jane.” Recently—after endless work and long reflection—she allowed herself to be blessed as Sister Jane Frances de Chantal, the second nun to be a Servant-Leader of this Order.

I think she’ll allow us to love her for a very long time—I think we’ll need her to love *us* for a very long time—as we grow old together in community.

MINISTER

[from Latin *minister*, servant]

Death—loss, change, wounds—lives throughout our local and universal community, of course, and a phone call from a large hospital invites us to appear before a planned gathering of hundreds of doctors, nurses, aides, and other staff...with the intention of dealing directly with grieving.

We sit among the assembly, as Sr. Jane stands before the group and offers eloquent reminders of grieving, as well as heartfelt testimony to her own losses, including her infant son. As I digest her words and feelings—as I “feel” what’s going on in all of us in this immense room—I decide to change my presentation.

As my turn arrives, I stand before these fellow pilgrims—some of whom I know well from long hours of vigil with dying AIDS patients—and take the time (in an uncomfortable silence) to look into their eyes. What I see confirms what I need to say.

I tell them that I’ve come to understand, after all these years of “priesting,” that they are “priests,” too—priests, ministers, rabbis—who bring the same blessings, anointings, absolutions, and committals that the “ordained” provide; in fact, I say, they likely do all of those things *much more* than we clergy...and their patients know that, too. I remind them that “ordain” comes from the Latin *ordinare*, “to appoint”...and by their presence and caring, they are “appointed” to those sacred acts I just mentioned.

As I say these words, signs of recognition blossom throughout the room, as these “priests, ministers, and rabbis” begin to nod in agreement...or simply begin to cry tears of joy, I think, that their “ordination” is now public in this place. Yet, the tears are not only of joy, but also of grieving...and I nudge them to consider the reality of this ordination: that if they, indeed, perform these ministries of vigil and healing, then there is certainly a process of grieving going on almost incessantly...something that church-ordained clergy often deny to their health’s detriment. If these folks know, then, that they are ministering in these demanding, sacred ways...well, they had better keep constant tabs on their own emotional, spiritual selves, lest they ignore nature’s process, and then become hardened, dry souls.

There was great response and discussion, many public and private testimonials to their experiences—not as proselytizing denominationalists, but as episodic ministers of the soul.

As I drove back to St. Dismas House, I remembered how often I’ve been charged with being “dangerous” or “non-canonical” or “antiauthoritarian” by saying such things to “laypeople.” Yet I knew—just as those assembled “ministers” knew—that it happens every minute of every day somewhere: the true sacraments of the spirit are offered as they’re needed in any given moment. And I smile to myself as I remember the Nazarene saying to his rag-tag assembly, “And you shall do things greater than I do.”

WORD

[connected to Greek *eirein*, to speak]

The Word

becomes

flesh !

Not

how we (usually) expect it,

or want it or look for it,

(when we pray to turn flesh into Word),

when we're frantic for power and dominion:

amidst pentagon briefings

or corporate jets

or dominating athletics

or congressional corridors

or pharmaceutical universes

or mutual funds and stock options

or celebrity receptions

or new car showrooms

or raffish political fundraisers

or elite bookstores and academies

or mergers and macros

or windows of opportunity

or dizzying penthouses and palaces

or even, perhaps, gothic structures

of solemn, godly assemblies....

But—unexpectedly, shockingly—the

Word

bursts forth into the

Infant Flesh

of humility

and homelessness

and poverty

and commonness:

simplicity

compassion

forgiveness

healing

community...

and Hope

HOLY

[from Old English *halig*, whole]

It started in late November, as Advent appeared on the liturgical calendar: I set myself to the yearly process of ascertaining my thoughts and feelings of what the holyday season might hold for my reflection and growth. Very quickly—it seemed almost like only moments—I knew that I would be journeying to Christmastide with both the Story and the Silence. The Story would take me to glories of both memory and now, while the Silence would remind me of the possibilities.

Happily, the very first thought (or maybe a feeling, really) that I noticed was a realization of joy. I mean real *JOY*. A real sense of being immensely fortunate (“blessed”?) by my surroundings—of being with those who share their lives and hurts and struggles and learnings with me...of being in the company of the poor and diseased, who offer me the daily bread of reality and courage and New Life...of being awash in the sea of begging and scraping and hustling to pay bills, knowing that whatever happens will be just okay for that day, knowing that it doesn’t take much “stuff” to live an inclusive existence, knowing that the Companionship is worth any and all of the hassles.

So I sat in the warm glow of joy for a while—feeling it, smelling it, holding it, tasting it...wanting every one of my senses to know the completeness of it, just as the holyday lights and candles and food beckon us with their own delights of following the Story to fruition.

As day followed day, I was fortunate enough to experience the profound celebration of “World AIDS Day”: of the enlivening presence of so many people at that sacred service; of seeing a Catholic bishop and a rabbi, along with a host of various clergy, stand together, laying hands of healing on the shoulders and heads of fellow pilgrims, even as hymns and prayers and passionate words shouted the joyful Truth that we are one Body, one Soul, one Presence.

The incantations of that evening had barely silenced in our hearts, when suddenly we experienced the magical chaos of St. Nicholas bursting through the front door of a packed St. Dismas House, offering cheer and fantasies and boxed-gifts to a flurry of wide-eyed children, some of them barely old enough to know what the red suit meant, some old enough to remember decades of Christmases—but never, ever, one quite like this one. In this vast panorama of ages, of children and adults who had spent the entire year struggling against the impact of a devastating disease, there was no illness present at all. Instead, from the kitchen, there were the mixed voices of twenty kin-folk offering up the seemingly-endless words of “The Twelve Days of Christmas” (with a bit of stammering as lyrics were hesitatingly remembered!); from the dining room were loud peals of laughter and yells of craziness as another large group of kin-children sent toy cars crashing toward one another in a cacophony of abandon; from the magically-decorated living room (“O my God, Robert, where did you *get* all of this stuff!!”) came a quietness of another large group of kin-folks, who sat together, eating from the feast on hand, speaking of their lives and hopes and determination. Kin-folks everywhere: the porch, the deck, the “business” offices, the front yard, the hallway—decorating cookies, sharing craziness, looking eye-to-eye, knowing that, regardless of anything, we are kin.

The countdown to Birth and Hope continued with more gatherings...with caroling and hospital visits and food boxes and emergencies and endless visitors, who often

arrived toting more gifts for children here and yon, with hugs, with anticipation.

As I read scripture at various services, I couldn't help but rehearse the Story as found in Matthew and Luke : the annunciation, the presence of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the call for a census, the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the Stable, the virgin mother, the resolute Joseph, the Wise Men following their star, the shepherds, the angels, the escape to and return from Egypt, the Holy Innocents...My God, I thought, what a wondrous story! What a perfect rendition of all that we want to happen, of all that could be good and kind and hopeful for each and all of us. What a majestic emphasis of love and good will, what a magnificent recipe of adoration and God-birthing for our yearly testaments, our songs and prayers, our celebrations, our kinship.

There was too much noise/motion/gaiety/cheer to even consider the Silence; yet, I knew it would come when I wasn't even expecting it, as it always does. The Silence of Mark and John would find me...remind me, envelop me, bless me.

On Saturday afternoon, Christmas Eve—after delivering bunches of gifts to nine children in a nearby town, after making preparations for the evening Mass—Sister and I set out to distribute food boxes in the St. Dismas neighborhood. Up and down familiar streets we barely coasted in the station wagon, seeing houses and children we had seen before...or never before. As the last sun of Advent began to set into that wintry horizon, as we were down to the last two boxes of food, I approached a house which seemed abandoned, and I was ready to turn the corner for a last stop. But something got me out of the car and onto the rickety porch, and I gently knocked on a door which vibrated at my touch...no answer...turn away...no, knock again and wait. Presently, a thirty-something black woman opened the door and looked at me suspiciously; I hesitated, suddenly embarrassed by the obviousness of what I knew I was about to say: “Merry Christmas! I'm Father Tom from St. Dismas...could you use some extra food?” Our eyes locked for a few moments of discomfort, and, with a faint smile, she nodded. I took two boxes into the house...a house of complete, abject poverty...and yet a house with an aura of warmth and “home” to it. I placed the boxes on the only table, and turned to leave, when, seemingly from nowhere, appeared this wondrous child. For whatever reason, I was stunned by his presence, and to fill a stranger's void, I quickly asked, “What's your name?” With absolute clarity of look and speech, this four-year-old announced, “I am Jonathan.”

“I am Jonathan.” The Silence had found me. Mark and John had found me. I knew, again, that I loved both the Story and the Silence. As we gathered to say the Christmas Eve Mass here at St. Dismas, as we went to concelebrate a similar rite with hundreds of brother and sister Lutherans in a nearby parish, as we traveled to Sundown Ranch to be with the children on Christmas morn, I carried the Story and the Silence within me, knowing that I had been blessed by both.

You see, after thirty years of studying the “historical” Jesus, of compulsively reading every book I could get my hands on, I know what has become obvious to me: there is no historical basis for the December date, the census, the stable, the killing of the innocents...nor is there any record of historical note about the magi, the flight to Egypt, etc., etc. But I also know that there is every reason for the *Story*—not the so-called “facts,” but the Story itself—just as there is such a need for love and hope and celebration. Without such stories, we will simply shrivel and die...and so I give thanks each year for what the Story allows us to know about ourselves and our souls.

And I know, too, that there is a reason for the Silence. The absence of the “birth narrative” in Mark (the “first gospel”) and in John reminds me that this Birth took place in all of the ordinariness of daily life: likely on a back street of Nazareth, on a day that no one but a few family members recorded, in a setting racked by poverty and chaos. “My name is Jesus” he would say to some stranger when he was four or five...and the stranger, along with family and friends, wouldn’t have a clue that the child would someday stagger the world of religion and wealth and pomposity and privilege, simply by being who he was.

What a bountiful and wonderful holyday.

I remember a friend telling me a story like this:

“Aren’t you going to wish us a Merry Christmas?”

The Master glanced at the calendar, saw it was a Thursday, and said, “I’d much rather wish you a happy Thursday.”

This offended the Christians in the monastery, until the Master explained: “Millions will celebrate not Today, but Christmas—so their joy is short-lived. But for those who have learned to celebrate Today, every day is Christmas.”

Thank you, God—thank you, kinfolk—for bringing me joy and carols and Santas and mangers and toys and Christmas Eve Masses and extra food boxes—for reminding me that the Story is historic, that the Silence is historical, that it is every day when I’m awake to it—and for bringing me face to face with the point and the Grace of it all: with the Christ...who said only, “My name is Jonathan.”

HUMBLE

[from Latin *humilis*, low; *humus*, earth...down to earth]

The Christ asked us to try to stay awake. I don't think that was some sort of arbitrary demand, but rather a hint about how we might learn something about our souls, about how we might be able to see and feel the wholeness of life. The Christ seemed to be advising us that if we would try to stay awake, then we might perceive that life is more than a sum of its parts: that recognizing the pain would give us a sense of the joys, that rehearsing the joys would remind us of the struggles—and maybe all of that, when synchronized into the wakefulness of our souls, would give us a taste of what the Buddha called “compassion,” the very reason for being alive.

Well, it's *hard* to stay awake. Terribly hard. It sometimes seems easier to stay asleep, so that the only feeling will come from passivity or self-indulgence. We know—each of us—how to sleepwalk, how to pretend that we're awake, how to go through motions of wakefulness: buying lots of stuff, becoming very professional, acting very cool, distancing ourselves from humanity, disparaging community, playing with interactive toys, becoming elitist and/or pompous, and on and on. Yet, the Christ kept talking about the Kingdom—full wakefulness—as the *real* norm: of getting slap-bang face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball with both the depths and heights of our innate capacities as human beings. Again, not as a demand for “holiness” but as a hint for “wholeness,” of knowing who we are in any given moment.

The entire process can sometimes leave us feeling pretty “humble,” and perhaps that's what the Christ was talking/living about. God is God...and we're not. So live out, he said, as fully as possible, what we're intended to be—human—and, if fully awake, that will be enough. But I want to be God (my prayers often remind me of that!) because being God would not demand that I struggle to stay awake...would not require me to live out *communitas*. But *humus* (“You are dust and to dust you shall return”) is what I/we've got...the pain, the joy, the taste of life as it is, not as I would fashion it with my pseudo-omnipotence. Damn.

All I could think of, it seemed, during the first few days of this new year was that Bob had the audacity to die on me. In my “sleep,” all I could conjure in my brain and heart was that this sweet and gentle man—who appeared so healthy and happy and transformed, who greeted me each morning with that quiet smile and long hair, who was called “Not Gay Bob” by his Gay friends who loved him so much, who had become utterly committed to recovery and went to meeting after meeting with his new friend Charlie—had died on me. As if he was supposed to live or die on my schedule! How nuts is that? Stay in touch with humus, Fr. Tom. Remember the nurses who stood by Bob as the ventilator was removed...how gentle they were, how they spoke quietly to him, how they held him and cried as he physically left us; remember the powerful and loving presence of Shannon and Sister Maria in those awesome moments; and feel the joy of having been Bob's friend, for however long. Stay awake to the moment...to *humus*, down to the soil of the earth.

Days passed, and I knew it was time to tell a couple of children that their mother was going to die—their twenty-five year-old mother. As horrible as the thought would be to them, I felt that they should know (at ages eight and eleven) what was facing them in the next few days; their tiny brother was too young to hear it all, but they needed to

know...I hoped it would give them a chance to say goodbye in the best way they could.

Sister Maria accompanied us to the small “prayer room” at the hospital, a room they will likely never, ever forget, for it was there that they heard the words that would change their young lives forever. As I said those words, I tried to gently stroke the young boy’s back, and I saw the first tear drop to his jeans, and I knew that his pain was immense in that suffocating place. After some disquieting silence, I said, “You know, I’ll bet it would feel absolutely wonderful right now if you went over there to Sister Maria and crawled into her lap and just let her hold you.” And so he did, without a moment’s hesitancy. He crawled into Sister’s lap, curled up almost into a ball, put his thumb in his mouth as he had as an infant, and cried his soul clean for a long time.

I knew again, in my own pain over these children and their mother, that I was not God...simply *humus*...but that was enough for me to recognize that I was witnessing one of the truly holy and awe-full and peaceful scenes I had ever experienced...and the boy-child delivered me from my God-arrogance. As the tears flowed down Sister’s face, I was reminded of staying awake, of compassion, of how lucky I was to be present.

At the funeral a few days later, I wanted to say the word AIDS...I wanted to be God again, to omnipotently tell the world—the *entire world*—to stop shaming and blaming, to remember compassion; I wanted to be able to list this young woman’s last name in these pages, to tell of her spiritual sisterhood with Jane, to fully acknowledge her courage and struggle and place in our world...but knew that the family and children would pay a frightful price in their small town if the word was uttered aloud, if identity was claimed. I wanted to do all of this with a thunderbolt from the heavens...but *humus* is the condition, is what we’re to deal with. Stay awake to it: it allowed me to hear—as we prepared to leave the post-burial wake—the boy-child yell out to me: “I loooove you, Father Tom!”

I wanted to be God the next morning when I heard that David had died...when I heard that a mentally retarded man had been executed in the continuing State slaughter...when I heard a man on the news suggest that we should list all the “welfare” names in the newspaper so “they” would be “ashamed”...when I visited my new, young friend in jail...when I couldn’t glean one word of compassion in the flaunted “Contract with America” and knew that the poor would be beaten down even further by the “Newt”-onian rhetoric of the next few years...when I realized that we are in for some mighty tough days ahead.

But then I happened to glance in the mirror (while washing paint off my face after spray-painting St. Francis House), and I was reminded of a humiliating fact: regardless of the depiction on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, God doesn’t get wrinkles! And I do, which ought to tell me *something*! Wrinkles from pain, wrinkles from joy, wrinkles from grace. *Humus* wrinkles. Staying-awake-wrinkles.

So...THANKS: Bob...Sister Maria...boy-child...David...Kim...Jane...jail friend...mirror...my Community in the Visible and the Invisible Body of Christ—for reminding me that *humus* is all I am or need or want. Even when I can’t always stay awake to it all.

Some days we just wrinkle.

Some days we wrinkle from the Dance....

INTENSIVE

[from Latin *intendere*, to intend]

I had worked within five or ten feet of this fellow-carpenter all day, studding-up and sheetrocking a partition. As is common with carpenters hard at work, we didn't say much to each other during those hours together. We measured and cut and hammered, an occasional word or comment thrown in, but always about matters of construction; I figured that this sixty-ish, rather taciturn coworker would just as soon be left to the task at hand.

Sometime in late afternoon—thinking about something I don't remember now—I suddenly asked him in the midst of hammering, “In your whole life, who was the person you felt absolutely closest to...or open with?” As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to somehow suck them back in, fearing I had (once more in my life!) asked something inappropriate. He stopped hammering for a moment...stared at the sheetrock...and then continued nailing, without a word. Minutes passed, and I remained silent, too. But then he quit hammering, glanced at me and the sheetrock alternately, and said quietly, “Well, it wasn't one person exactly...it was a group of guys. We were in a submarine off the coast of Germany in 1943...and the depth-charges from a Nazi destroyer began to go off around us...banging us real bad...and we thought we were going to be dead soon. And...I don't know why...we began to quickly tell each other things that we hadn't said before in all of those months together...things about who we loved and hated...after-war hopes we had had...things we believed about God and religion...regrets and guilts we carried...parents...memories. It was noisy and scary as hell, but we heard each other somehow, holding on for dear life. And, finally, the damned depth-charges stopped dropping—I guess they thought we were dead—and we sat silently, still sweating. God, it was the worst moment of my life...maybe the best. I think of those guys every day...and the things I told 'em that I've never told anyone else, even my wife.” I smiled at him, and we continued hammering.

Today, I sat in the waiting-room of the Intensive Care Unit at East Texas Medical Center, taking a break from holding the hand of a friend, comatose and dying of AIDS complications. I sat among a group of mainly strangers—old, young, black, white—as they, too, held vigil for friends and loved ones who lay, close by, struggling for life. As I listened to quiet conversations that I couldn't help but overhear, I heard words—back and forth between strangers—of breathtaking intimacy: of who they loved, of what they believed, of miracles they sought, of loss they feared, of parents and children and relationships, of regrets and joys, of hopes possibly gone.

I knew that we were in our own submarine, receiving depth-charges all around—a place we didn't want to be just now, but a place of holiness, made sacred by truths being uttered. I wondered, as I inwardly recited my own litany of life, how many of these intimate confessions had ever been uttered out loud to others in non-emergency times, how many opportunities we had ignored to offer our deepest selves to anyone else...and especially to those who are lying in beds nearby this now-sacred room. Hearing these words of confession—certainly rarely heard in churches or living rooms or bedrooms—I wondered to God and myself if it's somehow perverse to be thankful for the depth-charges of life, those terrifying moments when we attain the sacred intimacy that we so desperately want.

I wondered—leaving the hospital, walking across the parking lot, driving home—
if I would enter again my own sacred circle of loved ones...and utter my own intimacies.

PEACE

[from Latin *pax*, *pacis*, quiet]

I wonder if “inner peace” is an “all or nothing” thing.

It’s something I’ve struggled with a lot—the concept and implications of it.

I know that sounds strange, and a bit like *Catch-22*: you know, if you have inner peace, then you (probably?) wouldn’t struggle with its aspects or implications. But I do.

I struggle with it because I have occasions to wonder if, in our society especially, the concept isn’t really a con, a way to be disconnected-but-guilt-free, a “system” which allows me to passively look at the world with an “other-worldly” detachment. And where does that lead us as a culture, a tribe, a nation-state, a spiritual body, a community? I wonder if it’s a *carte blanche* for materialism-without-conscience, or MEism with spiritual underpinnings—or, in fact, perhaps I’m simply too jaded...that it’s really the ultimate answer to all that is sacred and worthy...and I just don’t “get it.” I struggle.

Part of my quandary comes from this: I get lots and lots of periodicals—a wonderful cacophony of different opinions and viewpoints. Some of those journals attempt to make sense out of the nonsense of contemporary life, while others try to bring some spiritual connection between psychology-religion-politics-spirituality. The articles are often brilliant and moving, and the authors usually carry endless credentials of study and experience. My mind and heart are tugged and pulled to consider new approaches, new ideas, new horizons, and I sometimes feel impressed by the seeming depth of the testimonials of inner-peace-dom.

But then there are the ads. I notice more and more that the ads for conferences and retreats and workshops and institutes are advertising various courses and certification by many of the same authors, and the promises are more than slightly breathtaking. “Come to Santa Barbara for the weekend and gain inner peace for a lifetime”; “Come bathe in the sunlight of the Caribbean for five days and be certified as a shaman”; “Come to our 4,000 acre retreat in upstate New York and enter the inner sanctum of spiritual wholeness”; “Attend our four-day national conference on inner peace (at the beautiful Hilton SuperGold Hotel and Spa) and come away transformed (along with 2,000 other conferees)!”

In all of these journals, I never see ads (or hear personal testimonials) for inner peace gained from working in a soup kitchen, or struggling as a volunteer in a hospice, or “giving it all up” to live with the poor. I never see ads for getting outside of oneself or outside of one’s “class” or outside of one’s comfort zone. Instead, it all seems so ephemeral, so “inner,” so effete, so privileged. Am I being too harsh, too cynical, too resentful, too stupid?

But I can’t stop looking around my neighborhood, my community; I can’t unknow that the last shaman I knew was a poor little guy who sponsored lots of people in AA (and who didn’t have a clue that he was a shaman). I can’t deny that 40,000 children die every day from preventable conditions. I can’t ignore that the lady next door needs a new roof to prevent falling sheetrock in her living room. I struggle, then, with the implications of inner peace; I struggle with the possibility that I’m so far off track in understanding it that I’m in a different universe of thought and perception.

I talk to myself about it. I remind myself of how hard lots of friends (and “enemies”) are working on their own karma, their own journey, their own soul. And then

I remember a world-famous retreat leader saying to me, “Well, simply put, contemplatives tend to be introverts, while social-servers tend to be extroverts,” and a friend who told me, “Conservatives are full of fear; liberals are full of anger.” And my voice asks, “Then do they both have a shot at inner peace...and/or: Who Cares...is the work getting done?”

Further, “Is this struggle within me a sign of inner peace...or would inner peace preclude the struggle?” Oh my.

The voice reminds me of Thomas Merton’s last known words: “What we are asked to do at present is not so much to speak of Christ as to let him live in us so that people may find him by feeling how he lives in us.” Is that inner peace, then: that sense of the Christ living in us so that we and others can perceive his presence? Yes...but, once again, where does that lead us in terms of who we are and what we do?

Did Jesus have constant inner peace? What about that nasty scene in the Temple? What about his occasional ranting and raving? Or his constant impatience with the apostles? What about his cry of “*Why me?*” Or, again, is inner peace a sometime thing, as when Mary poured oil on his hair and stroked him into contentment? And is “contentment” a description of inner peace?

Did Gandhi have inner peace, even as he said NO to the second most powerful nation on earth? When he sat for six years in an isolation cell? When he fasted unto the gates of death in order to rekindle the commitment and courage of the poorest of the poor? When he gave up every material possession? Or should he have “gone to the Caribbean” to obtain inner peace?

Did King have it in Memphis...or did the Buddha have it a week after his enlightenment...or did Mohammed have inner peace before the ascension? All the time? Part of the time?

Is inner peace the ultimate grail we should all seek? Is it the Kingdom of Heaven? Or is it, rather than the endpoint, actually the starting point, when we decide to really *see* those outside of us who are suffering, starving, naked, dying? Or is it some point along the way?

Would inner peace come from sitting with a guru or a Famous Therapist...or doing yet another bible class...or attending a course in Serenity...or reading some inspirational literature...or seeking a fat bank balance...or listening to Newt’s or Rush’s gospel of elitism...or pondering the New American Values...or accepting that God is Red-White-And-Blue?

Companion Doris tells me that anger and action and struggle and chaos don’t preclude inner peace...that she perceives that I seem to obtain inner peace even as I tilt at windmills. Perhaps that’s not what she said, but that’s what I heard. I think she perceives it better than I do. So I continue to struggle...and sometimes get bored with the whole thing; yet sometimes feel a sense of stability in the craziness, sometimes think that inner peace is something I “should” have in these current “spirituality movements,” much like I should have a BMW if I want to look special.

It seems like it’s been a strange and chaotic month in which to ponder inner peace—but maybe chaos *is* the best time to ponder it. It’s been a month of change, of threats, of attacks, of glories, of silliness.

It’s been a month of politicians and local wealthies describing me and us as “troublemakers”(“Anyone who moves to North Tyler and tries to be with Blacks and

AIDS patients *must* be a troublemaker”); folks threatening to withhold donations unless this or that happens; local politicians enraged because I was invited to bless the new Clinic; the endless rhythm of lethal injections into prisoners’ arms; having to warn visiting, out-of-state Gay Companions about the possibility of being physically attacked in East Texas; reacting as our Companion Michael is threatened with both physical harm and denial of vocational livelihood...and gentle Doris is verbally abused for her place in this Community; sitting in the sacredness of the winter retreat, in which many folks struggled with and shared their own demons; confronting our State Representative on his myopic, reactionary social views; noticing that, once again, in this year’s budget, my bishop (in another state) is going to pull down about \$140,000 in salary and benefits.

Yeah, well. I ain’t in control of the universe.

I guess I need inner peace. I suppose it’s a good thing. Maybe I experience it, maybe I don’t.

But I do know that it can’t be a convenient substitute for doing the work. My “inner voice” says that it’s either the reason for doing the work, for doing ministry, for forging community...or it’s a con.

Inner peace or not, if “troublemaking” is what we’re doing, then we will continue to do more of it.

If fearful folks believe that we will be scared away or silenced, they will be disappointed as we celebrate our life together.

If manipulative folks believe that financial threats will change our course, they will see us even more dedicated to intentional-poverty.

If over-controlling folks believe that “professionalism” and/or “institutionalizing” will usher in the Kingdom, then we will remind ourselves of humility and simplicity.

If politicians believe that exclusion or threats will implode our community, they will simply strengthen our commitment to the work.

If gossipmongers believe that innuendo or bashing will keep pilgrims from this sanctuary, they will simply miss the joy of what happens here.

And the joy doesn’t come because we’re some kind of special heroes or superior saints or holier-than-thou, but because we’re given the *immense gift* of being in the presence of those who are struggling for Life, who are transforming, whatever the cause or reason.

I remember the words of the great preacher/activist William Sloan Coffin, Jr.: “###Be angry but do not sin.’ Jesus was angry more than fifty percent of the time, and it’s very dangerous theology to try to improve on Jesus. The anger needs to be focused, but anger is what maintains your sanity. Anger keeps you from tolerating the intolerable.”

Robert just told me that he looked in the dictionary for various meanings of “monk” and “monastic”...and in one of the definitions, monks were described as a group of *tramps*!

Wow...maybe Doris was right...I just had a twinge of inner peace!

LEPER

[from Greek *lepros*, scaly; derivative: outcast]

On a Wednesday afternoon in early March, amidst the chaos which so often seems to happen very suddenly at St. Dismas House, a man appeared at the front door and asked me if we could talk for a few moments. I told him that would be fine, and he motioned for me to follow him out on the front lawn, presumably away from the noise of folks congregated in the living room. Once outside, I recognized the Domino's Pizza uniform he was wearing, and I noted from his nametag that he was the manager of the branch nearby the House. I also noted, from his manner and his voice, that he was a kind man.

"Father Tom, I was told by the Area Supervisor to give you a message over the phone, but I decided that I couldn't do this by phone...I knew that I had to look you in the eye, to tell you face-to-face... 'cause I thought the phone was sort of the coward's way...."

I couldn't imagine what on earth a manager from Domino's Pizza would have to tell me that could be this serious, but I quickly realized that this gentleman was in a good deal of inner conflict about whatever it was he needed to say.

"Father, as you know, our store has been giving you a couple of free pizzas once a month for one of your suppers here...and I've really enjoyed helping to do that each month...but something has come up that I don't have any control over."

The more that this kind man glanced from my face to the ground and back, I could feel the muscles in my stomach start to tighten, as I began to internally predict what the punch line was going to be.

"You see, Father, we have received a few phone calls in the past several days...phone calls asking us if we had an employee who has AIDS...phone calls telling us that people won't buy any more pizzas from us since we have an employee who has AIDS..."

"Do you have an employee who has the HIV virus?" I asked.

"No sir, I don't believe we do, but these calls seem to be of the rumor type thing, and the Area Supervisor couldn't imagine why someone would want to start such a rumor, and then he decided that if these rumors were going around town...well, and if we were giving you free pizzas once a month...well, people might think that our delivery person caught AIDS by delivering pizzas here."

"But you don't deliver those pizzas here, do you?" I added rhetorically. "We always pick them up at the store, don't we?"

"Yes, sir, that's the truth as far as I know it."

"In this whole crazy situation, then, if we assumed that people caught AIDS from each other by casual contact, then I guess we would have to further assume that it happened in the store, where lots and lots of people come to get pizzas, and you don't have any idea which customers have AIDS or cancer or diabetes or" I suddenly stopped my foray into faux-logic, and asked him simply, "What do you think about all of this?"

"It all seems real crazy...and sad.. But, Father, I also know that the Area Supervisor has made his decision that we can't *give* you any more pizzas but we can *sell* them to you at a reduced price of six dollars each." He looked down at the ground.

I thanked him for his great graciousness in being willing to come to talk about this

personally, and I offered strong gratitude from all of us here for their previous monthly gifts of food. I told him that I considered him a Companion of our community. He seemed pleased.

The next day—the “usual” day for us to receive the monthly gift of food—I called Domino’s and ordered two pizzas. They knew, by Caller ID, who I was and where I was from. The operator told me that the pizzas would be ready at 6 pm, as I requested, and that the cost would be six dollars each. Sister Maria and I drove to the hospital and sat with an AIDS patient, a dear friend of ours, who was dying, and then we went to Domino’s. After the twelve dollars passed from my hand to their cash register, I asked if I might speak with the Area Supervisor. When he appeared at the counter, obviously uncomfortable, I took his manager’s lead and asked him to step outside so that we could talk privately. Once in the parking lot, I told him that I had asked Sister to accompany me to witness our conversation, solely so that I could later confirm to myself what my words had been. With that caveat, I proceeded to discuss the situation with him, to review the details, to try to understand the logic involved.

He was a pleasant enough man, rather young, trying hard to convince me that he certainly did not agree with the exclusion of individuals based on illness or anything else...trying to explain how there was a difference, apparently, in selling pizzas at a reduced price to possible AIDS patients, as opposed to actually giving them such food gratis. I, on the other hand, was trying to emphasize that such rumors can only truly be stopped if we refuse to give in to misinformation and exclusion. And so we bobbed and weaved through a tense-but-kind conversation, each of us knowing that the ending would be back at the beginning. With another thank-you for their previous benevolence, I shook his hand, and Sister and I returned to St. Dismas with twelve dollars worth of pizza...and the contentment of knowing that waiting for us was a group of people who give us joy simply by being who they are.

And so we have the silly sadness of AIDS patients being denied free pizza.

But you and I know that it isn’t that. We know that this sort of thing goes on everyday. We know that it is fear—the same fear that drives racism and sexism and all sorts of isms—and when fear is allowed, then some person or some group must be sacrificed. It is, again, simply making “them” out of “us,” a practice which has never brought hope or resolution to any problem in the history of the world. Or at least that’s what the Christ and the Buddha and other great Teachers seemed to say. But, we seem determined to return over and over to the empty well of fear.

It has been written that when St. Damian was working with lepers on Molokai, he did not become a true member of that community until the day he arose to preach a sermon and began with the words, “*We lepers...*”

Mary Fisher—a daughter of one of the wealthiest families in America, a mother of two beautiful children, and a person who happens to have AIDS—spoke to the Republican convention a few years ago, suggesting that we can only be in community when we acknowledge our interdependence, when we know that we are one in spite of diseases and differences, when, as one example, we can say that we are pilgrims together, when we can say that we are *all* living with AIDS...together.

The fear will not subside or end because people like me travel to speak here and there; rather, it will subside when each of us refuses to carry rumors and fear and ignorance to our cocktail parties or our country clubs or our churches or our lodge

meetings or our workplaces; when we are willing to see the Christ in those around us, regardless of their illness or health; when we can acknowledge—and then put aside—our fear long enough to admit our common pilgrimage; when we can pause long enough and search deep enough in our souls to see and celebrate the vision:

On the night before his death, he gathered together a community meal with those who had shared his life, his ministry, and his love...the room was filled with all sorts and conditions of folks: some with horrible diseases, some with perfect health; some very poor, some very rich; some very conservative, some very zealous; some very Jewish, some very Gentile; some very young, some very old; some full of fear, some full of freedom...and during the meal, he took the common bread—which that special night was encrusted with delicate cheeses and spices and mushrooms and onions—and he blessed it, broke it, and said, “This is my Body...eat from it...each of you...for now...and for eternity....”

INCARNATE

[from Latin *incarnare*, in flesh]

Holy Week was a symphony of sounds and sights, actions and reactions, blessings and struggles...all of it incarnate evidence of community and passion.

The Maundy Thursday “Seder” was a ritual reminder of the bondage we bring upon ourselves, even as we seek spiritual freedom together in community; the latter was punctuated with the foot-washing rite, a yearly, sacred experience of our Teacher’s command to serve others as the way to know blessings for ourselves.

At noon on Good Friday, several of us—following Billy as he led us with the “St. Dismas Cross”—began our procession into and through the downtown streets of Tyler, marking the Stations of the Cross, remembering that the Christ is continually crucified in our present world. Amid the stares of motorists and pedestrians, we walked in the bright sun, stopping at various locations to remember the crucifixions of homelessness, poverty, despoiling of the earth, violence, selective justice, war-making, prejudice, abuse, unemployment, greed, and all the other nails that are driven into the wood of separation and despair. We knew, though, that we are as involved in the chaos as much as anyone, and so we asked for forgiveness, even as we blessed those we might call enemies. Some of the procession was marked by comments of derision and scorn and damnation by onlookers, but nothing could deny the sacredness of the act to us. We were amused as a photographer from the local newspaper rushed to take dozens of pictures of the procession, for we knew that such photos of a ragtag procession of longhairs and diverse pilgrims would never be printed.

Holy Saturday brought early clouds and drizzle, but not enough to dampen the passions for a loony day on the fields of play: yes, hard as it is to believe, a whole bunch of us gathered to play softball...and, yes, the rumors are true: Sister Maria actually caught a fly ball (and screamed), Kim snagged a line drive on the pitcher’s mound (and then sat down for several minutes to contemplate it all), and Ociel wore Easter rabbit ears in right field (and occasionally inspected ground bugs as the game progressed!). Anyway, it was a wonderful afternoon (with Chef Shawn serving up turkey legs and hotdogs)...and it was all just crazy enough to try it again soon.

Easter felt more important to me this year, partly because the day itself felt less important. Amidst the glorious weather and new flowers, I was thinking a lot about the fact that we are beginning our third year of work here, which caused me to reflect all day on the past two years. As I remembered the day of “opening the door” of St. Dismas House (and laughed to myself about all the misspellings of “Dismas” since then), I remembered sitting alone in the living room that day, not having a clue about what might lie ahead, wondering if I had the resolve and patience to simply sit and wait. I knew that the Christ would be coming to the door in the form of I-knew-not-what, and I questioned whether I would have a soul open enough to recognize him or her at first glance...or ever. Those memories on Easter Day this year, memories only two years old (or are they a hundred years old...or two thousand years old?) remind me of why I believe that resurrection is an everyday event, that I would have to be brain-dead and soul-dead and heart-dead not to recognize the Visitation every day of my life, as the Christ arrives daily in the person just out of jail...or the child with scars of abandonment...or the man newly diagnosed with a terminal infection...or the parent who struggles to know that their gay

child is fully a creation and celebration of God...or “the young rich man” who wants to know how to let go.

Perhaps, then, this was the first Easter Day of my twenty-seven-year priesthood that I felt it was okay not to go through the automatic machinations of theology and eschatology and haplogy—not to have to ruminate and wrestle with an Empty Tomb as historic or historical—but to know that each time a new person comes to the door or each time a beloved Companion comes back through the door, it is then that the stone is rolled away, it is then that both the searching pilgrim and the Chosen One arise in the same body...and, yes, resurrection is a daily gift.

So Easter Day passed quietly and joyfully, noisily and peacefully, after two years of chaos and death and celebration and immense loss and unimagined gain. Easter Day followed foot-washings and public processions and the screwiest softball game I ever played; Easter Day followed nights and days of homeless Christs filling all our beds and sofas. Easter Day—when the Magdalene went to the grave, only to mistake a gardener for the Living Spirit—was a reminder to me and us that we are gifted daily with all that we need, if we will only see and listen, if we will only sit quietly and answer the door.

SWING

[from Middle English *sweyen*, to sway, oscillate]

Is it worth the trouble on Sunday mornings to drive a hundred miles to spend a limited amount of time to be with a bunch of adolescents who are struggling not only with the vagaries of young adulthood, but, too, with the recovery process from addictions and dysfunction and childhood horrors?

These kids, aged 13 to 18 for the most part, can't seem to understand that we go there for as many selfish reasons as for unselfish. The more or less 35 of them, whether individually or grouped together, seem to struggle with the notion that we are there not only to bring the possibility of community and communion, but also to receive those grace-full moments of breakthrough, of sharing, of declaration, of gentleness, of hope. Little do they seem to comprehend that they are saints and ministers—even in their own fantasies of their unworthiness—that they offer, even by their silence, a sense of life and being.

Often, as we move through the Reeboks and the Nikes, clumsily trying to get to the next person to put the broken Bread into his or her hands, to offer words of blessing and comfort, we notice what we cannot help but notice: multiple scars on wrists and arms—some faint, some freshly recent—each a pinkish or blackish or brownish signature of past despair, of I've-had-enough-of-this-earth-born-pain, of damn-you-damn-me-damn-it-all. Often, after the Bread is pressed into the palm, we gently touch those scars with our fingertips, as a further act of communion and hope. And each time we wonder, in the depths of our own souls, whether these children—these miracles of pain and one-day-at-a-time redemption—can so easily see *our* scars...and whether or not we are so willing to make our scars so public, so obvious, so intentional. Seeing and touching their scars, we are, perhaps, a little more willing to share our own. Sometimes.

And when we hug at the end of the communion (after the final blessing, we rehearse the famous/infamous declaration from the ending of all our groups here: "If you don't get a hug, you're a fool!"), we realize, too, that many of the firm and fervent embraces are probably surrogate longings for estranged parents or absent siblings...or simply a chance to hold onto another warm body for a few seconds, just to feel the "other." Even the "passive" sort of hugs are still hugs, still risky, still miraculous from young folks who have learned not to trust much of anybody. And we wonder, again: do they know that our hugs are just as needy, just as risky, just as hopeful of acceptance? We hope they know.

They teach us, too—if not completely "new" lessons, at least they teach us to remember what we already know about ourselves, our craziness, our fears.

A case in point: a few weeks ago, we arrived at the facility, ready to do our "usual thing" of informally gathering, hearing the Word, reflecting on the meaning for us, sharing the Bread, offering prayers of petition and thanks, hugging and hugging and hugging. But it was a sunny, beckoning day outside, and a group of off-duty staff members had come out with bats and balls and gloves, and with the wonderful enticement of softball. The staff-member-in-charge asked if there were any possibility of playing softball instead of "doing church"...and it took only a moment for them to realize that, after a softball-less summer, we were probably far more eager than the kids to play instead of pray! And so we did. Lining up—boys and girls, men and women—to see

which team we were on, what batting order, which field position. We were a ragtag crowd—both teams—but the sun and the chatter (and the specter of a priest in blue-jeans-and-boots trying to run the bases) made it feel like any softball game anywhere: sheer heaven.

Batter after batter tried to show his or her prowess, skill, and attitude, with the more athletic types getting the usual admiration or secret envy. And then it happened. Then this skinny little guy, replete with eyeglasses and the “wrong” shoes and a sense of complete discomfort with this athletic challenge, stepped up to the plate for his shot. As he took his practice swings, attempting to get a feel for this wood weapon in his hands, it became abundantly obvious to each and all that he may have never, ever before held a bat. But, undaunted, he held the club in exactly the wrong way (with hands far apart and a bit askew), swinging at pitches that were either too far inside or too far outside, not getting within six inches of anything that was thrown his way. Strike one, two, and three went by quickly...and he paused, and looked around at everyone, and smiled and dropped the bat on home plate...walking away, sitting in the long grass. And, two innings later, after showing much the same ineptness as a fielder as he had with a bat, he stood back at that plate and tried again: one, two, three. A smile. A seat in the grass.

No, he didn't get a home run that day (as he might have in a Disney flick), or even a base hit; he went zero-for-three. But he was all we could think of during the drive home: a kid, in recovery, with all of his peers watching, had stood up to risk the possibility of learning, of having some fun, of struggling with all the nakedness of adolescence...without an apology or remorse or explanation or hip-blabber. He just stood up, took his swings, and sat down. With a smile and a glassy-squint into the sun.

Is it worth it to drive a hundred miles on Sunday mornings to be with a bunch of adolescents struggling through recovery?

Well, only if you want to see the Christ at bat.

PROPHET

[from Greek *prophetes*, to speak for another]

It appeared in very few newspapers; when it did, it was lost in middle and back pages. Virtually no important editorials or columnists to trumpet the news.

It had none of the thunder of terrorism, skyrocketing stock markets, or seventh-game playoffs.

It spoke with no eloquence, no hyperbole, no bombast.

It simply is and was and will be.

It spoke of us and our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, much like a Native American mystic might remind us of the effects on the seventh generation; or as an ancient prophet might leave his flock and his sycamore grove to call us—to beg us—to listen, to ponder, to shake, to tremble.

It would cause the wisest of historians to remember other times and other places, times and places when similar words and similar notice were similarly ignored. Yes, the historians know the meaning, even if they fall silent in the very knowing of it.

It was not announced, debated, argued, glorified, damned, or even denied on any floor of the Congress; nor in committees or subcommittees or Senate and House offices. Rush and good ol' Jessie Helms must have been pleased.

It caused no seeming concern or sermon from Jerry Falwell or Billy Graham...or even the preacher down the street.

It didn't seem to headline "Headline News"...nor get a sound byte in the sections "at the top of the half-hour," or in the middle, or at the end; not in political news or Wall Street news or sports news or fashion news or entertainment news...yet it was part and parcel of each and all.

It was slow news stuff—even on a slow news day. It was so slow, given today's cyberspace pace, that it was over and forgotten before even a yawn could form in disdain. It was so slow that it took over a decade to form and grow in magnitude, to envelop us and ours in its grip, its power, its unforgiveness.

It, yet, was lightening fast in the context of bell curves and traditions and longstanding assumptions of our life, our community, our values, our expectations. But the paradox is that we have lost the speed of it in the slowness of it, and the slowness of it in the speed of it.

Were we prophets—less focused and obsessed on the flock and the trees—we might see the forest of it all: that it dwarfs whatever we routinely call important in our daily lives, our political, economic, churchly, factional lives. Were we prophets, we would recognize that it is about our souls and goals; that is, it mirrors the core of our tribe, our people, our justice, our hopes.

It is about all political parties, all views of reality, all religious persuasions. It is about budgets, prisons, television trials, religious crusades, dying babies, luxury medical suites, homeless families, private schools, abortion, crime, drugs, lifestyles, stock market record-highs, deficits, S&L bailouts, defense budgets, big business, welfare, health insurance, cosmetics, tax cuts, groceries, unemployment, executive bonuses, and likely anything else you might think of to add to this list. It is about you and me...and everyone you and I know or will know for, probably, the rest of our lives.

It is simply this: from the last accountable year that we can examine from Federal

Reserve figures, we now know that at least 40% of the *entire* wealth of this nation is owned by only 1% of the population. Period.

Were we prophets, we would likely run to the streets, shouting to one another the news of this gigantic shift in our national soul, shouting the knowledge of what a situation like this has meant to all previous societies which ignored it, shouting the very alarm for democracy and equality which prophets, in more spiritual terms, have always tried their best to indicate to peoples who would not see or hear...in fact, the kind of wake-up call which has always caused prophets to be shunned or ostracized.

But the shouting these days comes from the 1%, telling us not that we are owned lock, stock, and barrel by them, but imploring us to *increase* the chasm between rich and poor, imploring us to punish the poor for the sin of being poor, imploring us to ignore the Christ and worship the CEO, the golden calf, the bottom line.

Were we prophets, we would know what the prophets knew: that stories like “Sodom and Gomorrah” were not about sex, but about greed and power and inequality and lack of civility and the prostitution of our children for the sake of immediate gain and comfort. Were we prophets, we would know where all of this is going to lead.

But, instead, we have sheep to sheer and sycamore trees to prune...and the Dow hovers around 10,000...and we can now find peace in our *concealed* handguns...and we pretend to be safer with over two *million* people in prison...and, hey, did you see that infomercial about how you can make a bundle off of real estate foreclosures?

SURVIVE

[from Latin *super, vivere*, to live beyond]

I “met” three people last week. It’s likely that you met at least one of them. If you’re very, *very* lucky, you’ll meet the other two. In fact, they are somewhere near you right now.

The first was a young, articulate, personable man who had been shot down while flying missions in our Most-Current-War-on-Whatever. He was presented to all of us, almost unceasingly, on every newscast and interview show on television for several days. He was, obviously, what reporters and military personnel dream of: the boy next door...bright, educated, emotional, thankful, polite, joyful, humble...someone you really couldn’t help but like; someone who used all of his survival training to stay alive in hostile territory; someone who was rescued by all of the resources available; someone—almost with the real-life innocence of a “Forrest Gump”—whom we could invite proudly into the Rose Garden for appropriate honors and adulation; someone we could imagine listening to over a Sunday dinner or a cold beer; someone with boyish good looks who showed, right up front, his terror and relief and thankfulness by showing us the tears which flowed honestly from each of those emotions. For at least six days of video and sound-bytes, we had a man-child who seemed like one of us—or, at least, what we like to think would be us in that kind of situation.

The second person I’ll call “Jimmy.” You don’t know him personally...or from TV. But he was shot down, too, although his mission was simply to remain alive somehow, both before and after his particular adventures in hostile territory. Jimmy was shot down in an area of the southern United States, which he didn’t know was hostile until he was about four years old. At that time, much like children all over the world learn, he realized that he was poor, that to survive he would have to depend on adults to somehow provide food and shelter. And then he was shot down. The first shot came from a neighbor who molested him, and, as he attempted to understand, survive, and heal from that, the second shot came from severe alcoholism in his family, leading to severe beatings from both parents. As he learned (he thought) to hide better in hostile territory, he was almost mortally wounded by a sniper shot: he was told, at age ten, to leave his home, as no one was willing to support him any longer. And so, like our pilot/hero, Jimmy went into the bush, learning to be very quiet and evasive and secure. His prime means of survival was to crawl into the rafters of garages during the night, to find pieces of wood he could lay across the beams to form a bed, to awaken in the dawn’s early light, to escape hostile territory by getting back to the anonymity of the mean streets. He learned to search dumpsters and alleys behind restaurants; he learned to go to grade schools and pretend he was a student in order to get food in the cafeteria; he learned, when he got very sick in the winter, to go to shelters for a few days—and then leave abruptly when someone wanted to repatriate him to a family of horror. He learned, finally, that the only people he met who seemed genuinely interested in him were other kids on the street, kids in gangs, kids who protected each other, kids who knew, even better than he, how to survive in hostile territory. Like the pilot, he was ready to shoot or steal or do anything else that would garner survival. But he didn’t end up in the Rose Garden or on any talk shows to rehearse his daring adventures; instead, he told his story to me in a lock-up...and, again like the pilot, his tears flowed in memory and pain, but no

joy. The rescue squad had not yet arrived in his life...and he knew they weren't coming anytime soon. He is, of course, on his own, carrying demons within him, searching for a new start in non-hostile territory. He wonders where that might be.

The third member of this coincidental trinity (I'll call her "Suzy") is a beautiful black adult woman on the streets, a denizen of territory so hostile and scary, a history so replete with terror, that the scars are grown over and calloused almost beyond recognition. She, too, was shot down. She had been flying high, as a seven-year-old, over the skyscrapers of a northern city in the United States, believing that jumping rope and creating songs were the only things required of a child in America. But her working father fell ill and died; her many brothers and sisters became competitors for food and attention. Suddenly there were strange men in the house, providing chaos and alcohol and sex and drugs...and, at age thirteen, Suzy was on the streets of the southern U.S. as a hooker, an addict, a soldier of ill-fortune in a land that spoke of baseball, apple pie, and Chevrolets. As a woman, now infected with HIV, she spoke her too-early-eulogy into my face, I knew not why. I just knew that I was honored for the circumstance, for the intimacy, for the Grace. With no Rose Garden available to either of us, but with Gethsemane at hand, we sat together in hostile territory, and I finally uttered, "I sure would love to meet that seven-year-old face-to-face...because I feel like she's right here with us, trying to tell us how scared she is in enemy territory." And suddenly this hard, desperate veteran of wars I can't even imagine, became seven again...and she sobbed forever and ever...and I made the sign of the cross on her forehead...and we knew, for just a few moments, an oasis of peace, a place where we would always be kin. Lacking a jump-rope, we became a hug—this unlikely duo—safe in the arms of the other, in hostile territory.

I guess that these three people and I learned last week that if you're going to get a rescue squad or if you're going to be honored as a hero in the Rose Garden or in special ceremonies at Disneyland, it all depends on where and how you're shot down. For some of us, there will be parades and brass bands and medals and proud patriots. For others, there will be politics and shaming and sermons, together with speeches about "family values" and "just say no" and "Christian Coalitions."

But what I knew most in my heart last week was how thankful I was that the Christ, our Teacher, had chosen to live in hostile territory—which he called the Kingdom of Heaven—with whores and thieves and broken children, and then counseled us to love ###em even more than we love heroic rescues or Rose Gardens or Disneyland or balanced budgets or tax cuts; in fact, to love ###em as much as we love ourselves.

RESPECT

[from Latin *respecere*, to look back]

As I attempt to survive the maelstrom of petty-revolutionary rhetoric, of political screaming and Religious-Right pomposity, I wonder who will next add to the onslaught of daily ranting for a “new order” in the land, to the tough-fisted hammering on the poor, to the desperate search for the strawman of national catharsis and blame, to the increasing certainty of the fundamentally “patriotic” that God-R-Us.

I wonder how far we will go to make others pay for our own indulgences in the greed-is-good neurosis, how severe our punishment will be for those who remain at our political, social, or churchly “mercy.” As I notice that there are only poor whites and poor blacks on the new chain-gangs; as I notice that there are more lawyers defending one rich man in an L.A. courtroom than I have ever seen at one time in the local courthouse arraignment room; as I see protective laws for indigent humans (and a devastated planet) summarily rescinded in Congress, I wonder who will next join the bandwagon of national religious fervor.

A couple of weeks ago I received a church bulletin, containing an article written by a friend of mine, a man I have considered to be gentle and compassionate. I was somewhat stunned to read his words about “absolute values,” about the need to return to the Ten Commandments, with innuendo that we somehow need to purge and wash the national body of all singular sin. There was nothing, of course, about multi-national corporate oligarchy or institutional racism or devastating poverty or obliterated social programs or anything that might suggest the complexity of living a struggle on the cusp of a new millennium; there was no mention of the S & L con job (acknowledged as the largest transfer of wealth in the history of the world), nor of the continuing debt of our endless wars (starting with Vietnam) nor of mothers who cannot possibly pay for day care, as they flip hamburgers—or as they scrub the toilets of those who are living the “moral” good life. As I attempted to make some practical, moral sense of my friend’s passionate plea for moral re-armament, I thought of a scene with another friend many years ago.

In the Seventies, I had been asked by my prep school alma mater to return to the Midwestern campus to participate in an “instructional” weekend dialogue regarding social priorities. After a short time in that place of memories from the quiet, secure Fifties, I realized that I was going to be in a very small minority of those who didn’t believe wholeheartedly in the “Progress is our most important product” mindset; I knew that my place on a panel discussion/debate (in front of hundreds and hundreds of students and faculty) was going to be that of the “radical” viewpoint, meaning that my recent experiences in the ghetto and college campuses and urban streets had left me speaking a foreign language to these folks.

As the weekend had spiraled from the heights of intellectual politeness to the bedrock of slightly inflammatory counter-charges, we found ourselves in a large auditorium for a final exchange of thoughts and emotions. I sat alone at a table on one side of the huge stage, while four faculty members sat together at a table opposite. We all made our introductory remarks—mine being centered on the “messiness” inherent in a multi-cultural, economically-classed democracy, while my counterparts spoke of law and order, equal opportunity for all people, the Russian menace, and a strong military. It was

likely clear to all present that this war of words had become more important than any resolution of the chaos that seemed to grip our society, even the society that occupied the auditorium.

And then an exchange occurred that has remained in my mind and heart and soul to this day.

During the question-and-answer finale of the debate, I was addressed by a faculty member who had been an icon in my student life there so many years before. This wasn't simply someone who had been a teacher of mine; this was the man who had given me my first real taste of scholarship, the man who had first confronted me with my own possible ability to write as I wanted to write, to have some self-respect in my own development. He was also a man almost incapable of social graces or small talk, known for his distance and solitude, and so we were never "close" as faculty and student; he was someone I had revered as a teacher, someone I held in awe for his deep and clever intellect. I was terribly uncomfortable on that stage opposite him, uncomfortable that we would have to disagree publicly on deeply-held opinions and feelings, uncomfortable that our long-term, fragile relationship might shatter. I remember that I was literally breathless as he asked his question.

"Reverend Jackson," he began in utter decorum, as if we had never met before, as if the question was not going to be rhetorical, "I do not understand why you persist in denying the obvious: that if we would return to the civility of previous decades, to the order of a time when people worked hard and acted with responsibility and civic pride, to a society in which moral authority was respected and political leadership was acknowledged, then much of what we have been debating would be moot!"

"To what era are you specifically referring?" I asked.

"To my years in the university...when I was working hard to earn my way...when we respected our elders, respected our fellow citizens, respected our Church, respected a civil way of living together!"

His face had reddened in his obvious sincerity, and he was visibly pleased with the affirming applause from this appreciative audience, which would have included me twenty years before. Rather than rehearse the matters which I had previously discussed, I knew I had to ask him a question—a question I did not want to ask because of my long-time respect for him as a scholar—but a question that was at the heart of all that was and is.

"And when was this era of civility and order?"

"The 1930's!" he said loudly.

"And where was this society of civility and order—where were you attending the university?"

He announced with full voice and certain smile, "*In Germany!*"

And there was silence in that vast hall. I stared at the tabletop. The silence continued. I glanced surreptitiously at my revered teacher, seeing only confusion and dismay. Finally, the moderator announced the conclusion of the discussion, thanked us all, and adjourned the meeting.

Afterwards, in the wings of that stage, behind curtains that hid us from the stares of others, my teacher came to me, tears in his eyes, and said, "What happened just now? What did I say? You know I didn't mean I supported..." Yes, I knew he didn't support a tyrant so awful that his name couldn't be pronounced in that moment; but I did know—

maybe fully for the first time in my life—that to acquiesce quietly to scapegoating and simplistic order would be to end up, ultimately, with tears in our eyes, with relationships forever changed, with regret we could hardly bear. Whether to his discomfort or not, I hugged him and thanked him for all he had given me years before. We walked away in opposite directions...I got on a plane and flew home. I read, with sadness, of his death years later.

As I look around at our current civic and political and religious landscape, I am reminded of all these things—of the choices we have, of the possibilities for compassion and struggle and resolution...as well as the extremes we harbor for simplistic, punitive responses.

I pray that we will seek the more difficult justice and hope.

I pray that we will not look back, twenty years from now, with tears in our eyes, regret in our hearts, and shame in our souls.

MAELSTROM

[from Dutch *maelstroom*, a whirlpool]

*How lovely it is
to look through the broken window
and discover the Milky Way.*

(Issa)

The afternoon of Sunday, August 13, seemed dreadfully hot, even for this East Texas clime. Perhaps, too, it was a matter of a month of chaos and unusual demands, of too many emergencies, too many unanswerable questions, too many bills, too little faith, too many inner expectations. Perhaps the heat was augmented by nine-hundred-plus days of struggling without much of a break, without a sense of sane retrospection...of not honoring the angels and demons that seem to take equal time in the soul of speculation.

But heat there was as I crawled out of the old station wagon in front of St. Dismas, just back from the post office where I had (nervously) mailed some due bills, along with a one-liner note to Jean and Glenn in Michigan, asking them when they were coming to this place again for a welcome visit. I'm not sure why I wrote them this day, for I contacted them no more than twice a year. Perhaps my weariness was sending a subconscious invitation for bliss; this aunt-and-uncle team always arrived, even briefly, with their prescriptions of healing: Jean with her ebullient craziness, her utter celebration of everything within ten feet of her, her hugs that could cause a teenage boy to blush and a grown man to sigh; Glenn with his quiet strength, his glasses-magnified-eyes of expectation, his firm embrace, the gifts of a kiss on the cheek and supportive whisper in the ear. Why I wrote that note—or why the thought of those impending gifts brought a well of emotion to my throat and my eyes this day—I did not know.

Just before pulling into the driveway, I had felt a “lift” of sorts, thinking quickly of the rest of the day; Sundays truly are my endings-and-beginnings around this place—almost regardless of the particular busyness of hospitals or whatever—for the late afternoons are filled with the balm of celebrating the Eucharist (“thanksgiving”) with people I love; of sharing a Community supper (of sometimes odd and assorted foods) with those and others who walk through the arched door; of sitting together in both the silence and the dialogue of sharing group, listening to words spoken and unspoken that fill my spiritual extremities with whatever it seems I need that week. And this day was to be even more special, as we had assembled the requisite cake, signs, and noisemakers to loudly and lovingly mark my mother’s eighty-third birthday, an event filled with much expectation for lots of folks who need and care about “Mother Mary.”

As I stood on the front lawn, I noticed with a quick glance that Sister Maria was walking rapidly up the sidewalk, looking at the concrete with that serious expression of hers that usually equates alarm with compassion; I knew that I was about to receive a message that I wasn’t expecting to hear just that moment.

“We’ve received a call”...her eyes were moist and soft...“your Aunt Jean had a sudden, severe headache last night...she was rushed to the hospital this morning...a brain aneurysm...they removed the respirator a couple of hours ago...and she died...and I’m so terribly sad to tell you this...” The rest of it became a blur, as I was held by Companions, as I struggled through Mass and dinner and group, remembering Jean and her beloved Glenn and her cherished sister whose birthday we had planned to celebrate ...laughing

and crying through all these years of my own memories with all of them...and grieving, seemingly anew, for all the folks we had “lost” here in the past two years. Too much, too much. I needed to go to Glenn, to sit in funereal presence with my mother and sister and the tribe of tears...to remember, to remember.

[“We have discovered from quantum physics that we breath in and out so many atoms—each breath containing so many of our atoms that we barely know how to write a number that large—and all of these atoms go into creation and remain and remain—so that they are in the universe forever, so that we are always breathing the atoms of all of those who have gone before, so that we become part of everyone and everything from all times and places....” (Deepak Chopra)]

I drove north and east toward Lansing, Michigan, too rapidly it seemed, to remember everything of Jean and of all those I had loved here; but breathing atoms to and from the universe as I drove. At the minister’s request, I “shared” briefly at the large funeral, trying—inanely, of course—to put words in the place of atoms. At one point, my mother simply pointed silently to words on the funeral brochure, words which said “August 13, Grand Rapids, Michigan”—words which both of us knew signified that one of these sisters had been born on that date in that city, while the other of these sisters, thirteen years younger, had died on that date in that city. I knew that they had talked on the phone long-distance every Saturday morning; I did not know—and likely never will—the intensity of such a ritual for two sisters, two women, who loved each other for that long. I sat and listened to others speak of life and death, as I intently breathed the atoms of my mother and my own sister, hoping to maintain as many as possible.

*[“But I have come to see the holy man!” said the visitor plaintively.
“You have seen me,” he gently replied. “If you look on everyone you meet as a holy person, you will be happy....” (Susan Trott)]*

I knew after the funeral—definitely and completely—in the midst of the maelstrom of emotion I felt, that I needed to leave soon for Wounded Knee. After all these years—decades even—of needing to go to the burial site of the ghost dancers, to take Jean’s atoms and my atoms and all my Companions’ atoms to that holy place, the time was now. I knew it.

I also knew that it was absurd and illogical and irresponsible to drive that far—to far western South Dakota—to simply transport atoms. But it was a matter of souls, too; a matter, a fulfillment, of standing on ancient earth where people had been massacred for their dreams—as we are all massacred and made holy for our real dreams—and the time for me and us was now. Jean and Dad and Jerry and Donnie and Richard and Kim and James and all the others—all of us whose atoms and souls had exchanged and merged—they knew why I was going.

Indiana-Illinois-Wisconsin-Minnesota-South Dakota became, truly, lands of enchantment and remembrance on the quest. The bright sun hit the late summer trees with a reflection of joy and exuberance; the dancing leaves seemed almost to be applauding the journey of our souls. And the earth, the Creation! Hundreds of miles of corn, so tall, so healthy, waiting only to be harvested, so that the cycle could begin again in the next season.

*“So much grain for food!” I thought.
“Empty the bombers and rockets of their death!
There’s so much to share!”*

Fill those planes with these plains!

Why can't it be done!

Enough of death! We must seek life in the death of it all!"

Suddenly, in my heart and mind, I wasn't driving that beat up station wagon, but a long and colorful converted school bus, painted outrageous colors, filled with all those folks we had supposedly "lost," all those atoms and souls who couldn't wait to get to Wounded Knee with me. Their voices sang and shouted and laughed in my memory and in my now. I was on the right bus to Wounded Knee.

I took respites to rest and read. Brother Toby, who adopts and loves children with AIDS in California, offered me his heart and soul and words in his *Childsong, Monksong*; he reminded me of so much pain—death and disappointment and rumors and lies and addictions—yet so much joy—lives and celebrations and reconciliations and honesty and growth; he reminded me that it's okay to be angry as well as serene, to stew and steam and then let go; he brought me back to the poet Issa, whose healing I had forgotten for so many years. I read, too, from the *Tao*, so that I might be reminded of The Way along the way. And then back behind the wheel of the bus, pretending I knew The Way.

Fast, faster across the Badlands and Black Hills and the prairie. Too fast, too eager as I closed in on the sacred ground, needing desperately, I thought, to sink my feet in it; suddenly flashing lights behind me, those of a Reservation Police Officer, who asked for my license.

"You were doing seventy-six miles an hour."

"I didn't realize..."

He looked at the picture of me in my clergy shirt on the license. "You a preacher?"

"Yes...well...a priest."

"Where you headed?"

"I'm going to Wounded Knee...I've been trying to get to Wounded Knee for a very long time."

"Well, I can't give a ticket to a preacher on his way to Wounded Knee. But slow it down and you'll get there!"

With that, my Teacher—dressed as a cop—drove off.

Had it been an icon of Successful America, the cemetery would have been manicured perfectly, guarded constantly, with historical markers of bronze. But it is the place of native remembrance, of poverty, of ghost dancers who believed they were invincible, just as I/we dance to the piper of denial. Their bodies, of course, were not armored against Federal soldiers, and so more than 130 women, children, and men died in their dance of memory. But the Cavalry didn't know of quantum physics and atoms and universal sacredness and The Way. So, I breathed their atoms in the confines of a dirt-and-dust sanctuary, a long concrete-covered trench, surrounded by a rusting cyclone fence. My Companions—Jean and all of the souls from St. Dismas—stood with me, and we gazed at the dozens of ribbons which had been attached to the fence over the years—ribbons of personal and tribal pride and remembrance—ribbons just like those on the Cross back at the House. We felt the soil; we cried in sadness and utter joy; we gave thanks for all that we had had and still have: that we still have Jean and "departed" friends and present Companions and native ghost dancers. It is all True. And we got back into the bus, to travel back Home...to another holy place.

*[“And you suddenly know: It was here!
You pull yourself together, and there
stands an irrevocable year
of anguish and vision and prayer.”
(Rainer Marie Rilke)]*

Maybe it was the remembrance of Jean and so many others; maybe it was the quiet reflection that the joys really are worth all the pain; maybe it was the realization that Brother Toby really is my brother and peer, existing to do his best at the vortex of chaos, just as I/we are; whatever it was, I knew that I was missing the hugs of my Companions more than anything else. As the miles and miles of return passed by, I knew fully the words of T.S. Eliot (and Julian of Norwich) from Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” words which I had put on a poster twenty years before.

*“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time:
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing nothing less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well.”*

I knew that it was time to breathe those atoms again with Companions who will explore with me, at a cost nothing less than everything.

And I was hugged upon my return—just as Jean loved to hug—and I looked through the broken window of ten thousand days, and I saw the Milky Way.

It looked just like where I had started from.

KINGDOM

[from Old English *cyning*, place of tribe, kin]

A letter arrives from a good man:

I enjoy reading the newsletter, *Journey*, when I get it. It makes me think a lot.

I am really touched by and supportive of the work that you and other Companions are doing there...I've really got to admire the guts and craziness that it took for you to pursue this path...The only complaint I have about *Journey* are the political comments denigrating Rush Limbaugh or Newt Gingrich or any other Republican points of view. I think all politicians need and deserve to be razzed once in a while, but many of your comments seem to be only reflections of general media caricatures of conservative type people as non-caring, self-centered brutes. While these caricatures may or may not have some basis in fact, it bothers me to see it in *Journey*. I guess I still retain the belief that many of the more conservative politicians actually are not neo-nazis or racists, and are trying to approach some of the problems of society from a different angle than what's been popular for the last few decades...I wonder if small communities like St. Dismas House will be able to help more people without so much government interference. Whatcha think?

What I think, my friend, is that you're a good and gentle man—something I've thought for the several years we've known each other, something which is obvious in your words of kindly admonition. I thank you for trusting me enough to tell me what you think and feel; I thank you, too, for carrying this ministry in your heart.

What I think, too, are those specifics which I need to always keep in mind, not only to frame reality but to keep my ego and soul in perspective: I speak only for myself; I "know" almost nothing; I—and *Journey*—are practically powerless in the world's terms; what I typically say or write are questions and comments which have been sorely tested within.

Ultimately, I am not concerned with political personalities, especially of the present variety, or even of the crazy cartel of the past few decades. Each is, of course, a child of God...yet each is, in my opinion, a "product" created and presented by various political-action-committees, which, in turn, are products created and presented by other children of God...who just happen to possess most of the wealth in this land and others. It does not greatly matter to me which of these children of God might be elected President, for my understanding of democratic, constitutional government suggests that through the elective process the electorate gets *exactly* what it deserves, by choice, plain and simple.

Within and beyond the political process, you and I are called, I believe—in our understanding of the Spirit and the words and the life of the Christ—to discern what is going on around and within us: to Creation, to our brothers and sisters and children, to those who are, ultimately at our mercy.

So I have no interest in caricature, name-calling, or razzing; I do have an interest, even in my basically powerless voice, to confront and address those in the Temple of US Power regarding their priorities, intent, and actions in our name. As an amateur student of history, I want to ask why we forget so soon the lessons from the distant and recent past.

As a student of the Gospel, I want to ask what place that Good News has in our national, spiritual dialogue in this land “under God.”

I disagree with you, my good and gentle friend, regarding what “angle” has been “popular” or not, be it political or spiritual, in these past decades. The Gospel appointed for this past Sunday was that of “The Shrewd Manager,” which ended with the declaration that we cannot serve both God and money. Take a look at the past thirty years (especially the past fifteen), and then tell me what you see. “Money” (“mammon,” etc.) connotes all sorts of things, from military extravagance to all the stuff that’s pushed at us (by us) every single moment on TV, radio, periodicals, political speeches, Temple sermons, and all the rest. What is it that we see in all of that...what is it that we serve in all of that?

I believe that the voice for the poor and the sick and the vulnerable is profoundly quiet in these days of mega-mergers, environmental rape, corporate oligarchy, and political condescension. So if any powerless and strident voice, even whistling in the wind, can remind us that the Christ lived with, ate with, suffered with, loved with, preached with, healed with, and advocated for the poor, then I hope that I will have the courage to be such a voice. And if that leads you or anyone to quit reading these words—or even to stop supporting this ministry—I will be saddened, but that will be a consequence that you and I and others will have to live with. But I will not quit writing them...nor apologize for them, except when I believe that I have erred.

And yes, I presently believe that small communities hold hope for healing and intimacy and joy...in other words, for a sense of the Kingdom. I am lucky to be in one. I pray that you will find one, too, in your new place. And, for your soul’s delight, I hope that your community will be among the poor; even the price that both John the Baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth paid for being among the poor, for heralding the Kingdom among those who had had no hope for it, was a price fully compatible with their souls’ delight. I think that’s why they and we call it the Good News.

On the other hand, do not ask me to believe that small, spiritual communities can *possibly* meet the gargantuan needs of the poor in this country—nor ask me to believe that this political suggestion by so many in the cartel is anything else but a pietistic sham to pass the *real* Federal bucks onto already-moneyed buddies.

But beyond all of that political mish-mash, stay well, gentle man; thanks for your kindness...and please keep us in your prayers, as we will keep you in ours.

HEAL

[from Old English, *haelen*, to make whole]

As I sat among my friends at the Agape Meal/Healing Rite on Wednesday evening (feeling fairly disoriented and a bit shaky after an all-night emergency), I realized how important this brief punctuation is in the middle of the weekly drama here. It seems—most days of the seven-day week—that the script we are enacting in this place is one of unceasing demands and emergencies and impossible situations, some of them overwhelming to the extreme. Constant phone calls; continuing guests at the door; another broken plumbing pipe at a certain House; a sudden call from the hospitals or jails; all of it unexpectedly expected, for we know that this chaos is exactly why we opened the door originally.

So I'm sitting among friends in that sacred silence. Some of them are infected with a deadly virus; some of them are not. But we all know, whatever our condition or need, that we are seeking healing.

I realize, in my own needs, that I'm also sitting among fellow-ministers, fellow-priests...priests that the "Church" will never so designate, but as ordained by Spirit and circumstance as I was by "apostolic" hands. "Ordained": from the Latin "organized." No, not very organized (thanks be to God), but as power-full as any fishers of men and women.

That is certainly one of the defining moments of Life for me, as the chapel bell rings to call our attention, as I look around the room and know that I am not alone in my priesthood, that I have been joined by all these pilgrims, all these purveyors of grace and healing and hope.

Perhaps it is the moment of the week when I continue to wash away (am healed of) at least some of that stuff I learned in seminary and afterwards: all that stuff that the "ordained" are somehow specially gifted or called to a special place of ministry—implying, of course, that "others" are not. I know in these quiet moments (because I have received their ministry, because I have watched the gospel enacted in hundreds of situations, because I have felt their healing touches) that these brothers and sisters are as "priested" as anyone on the face of the earth...ever.

I am reminded, too, in that quiet moment, of the sense of "sacrament." How many times did I answer, in my early priest days, with the automatic, "official" response: A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inner and spiritual grace. And that's true, at least in my lifelong experiences. Yet, in those early days, how much of that was tied to a rigid sense of the sacrament being offered in a specific and defined ritual or liturgy, in a church building amidst a pre-selected group of people who were, with me, saying all of the right, organized words. And so I sit in the silence of Wednesday dusk, being ministered to by the healing of lay-priests, and I am reminded suddenly of the glorious sacrament that will never be described in any official text—the true, grace-full, astonishing sacrament of the half-baked cookie.

The sacramental act began during our vigil with Rusty as he was dying at the hospice center. He had drifted in and out of consciousness, and in a period of sudden animation, he announced that something he wanted—something he truly *needed*—in his last days or hours was to enjoy and share a batch of chocolate chip cookies. Not a regular batch, you understand, but a *half-baked* batch...a batch that would proclaim doughyness

and gooiness...warm, messy...perfectly warm and perfectly messy. And so we quickly tried to figure out how to do all of that, and the quest landed us at a large grocery store, looking for the perfect pre-mixed dough.

Each package of sausage-like dough left us with the same unfortunate and frustrating message: no, it couldn't be baked in a microwave—and microwave was all we had available at the hospice center. We went from one package to the next, hoping for some miraculous new formula, but to no avail. Sister Maria continued to hunt, and I, feeling increasingly desperate, wandered around the store, finally gazing into the tempting glass of the bakery display case. I must have appeared somewhat psychotic in my manic stare, for the gentle woman baker asked not, "Can I get something for you?" but rather, "What is it?" She seemed concerned and somewhat wary of my fixed stare...

"Okay," I blurted, "this is the situation: Rusty, our dear friend, is dying over at Hospice. He's young...he's a wonderful man...and all he wants is some chocolate chip cookies." The rehearsing of this crazy quest caught me in the throat for a moment. I couldn't speak momentarily, and I knew that my eyes were beginning to fill, which I didn't want to happen in the middle of this busy, noisy grocery store. Finally: "And I'm not talking about just any chocolate chip cookies, 'cause Rusty needs *half-baked* chocolate chip cookies...those doughy, hot, messy ones...you know...."

She didn't miss a beat. "Well, of course, I know. I'll tell you what: if you can give me fifteen minutes, I can make one of these big, pie-sized cookies...and I'll *half-bake* it for him!" I smiled and nodded and searched for Sister. In the land of cookies-from-scratch, I found her still searching...and gave her the good news, and she sought out other stuff...and I went outside to smoke. I wondered what other shoppers thought, in their goings out and comings in, of this strange-looking, smoking, pacing, grieving, excited priest at the entrance of the grocery store. Kindly, their stares were brief.

As she put the hot cookie tray in my hands, the baker of the sacrament smiled and added, "No charge. Tell him 'God bless.'"

Rusty had continued to press the morphine pump during our absence, but the sight and smell of the tray brought him to a new consciousness...and he beamed as I told him of the baker's gift. And then he stared that important question at us, and I responded, "Yes, *half-baked!*" That was the cue for the celebration of the sacrament—no magic words, no vestments, no responsive readings. We started to be polite in the cutting and the sharing—but, then, the "inner and spiritual grace" sort of exploded into the "outward and visible sign"—and all of us were wonder-fully covered, from fingers to mouths, with gooey, hot, messy, half-baked chocolate chip cookie nectar, the best that had ever been made, *ever*. And we laughed.

The tray remained by the bed for a couple of days. Other pilgrims to Rusty's vigil—mom and dad and sisters and relatives and lots of crazy, gentle friends—took their pieces of the messy sacrament. Bits and pieces were fed to Rusty on and off, and he would have chocolate-swirled crumbs on his face for as long as he wanted them left there. And he continued to plead with the morphine pump to pump faster. And then he died...with the sacramental crumbs on his bedside table.

I am filled with gratitude each Wednesday, as a different "minister" in this Community acts as Celebrant for the agape/healing sacrament; I am filled with peace and affirmation as that person lays their hands on my head and offers words of encouragement and reminder and acceptance; I am filled with awe by the strange

absurdities which beckon us to that room together; I am continually astonished that so many wish and need to be there...like me, I suppose, sensing respite amid the passions of struggle.

I am thankful, in my own woundedness and tiredness and self-imposed unhealthiness, that I am given a lush oasis of words and hands and touches and healing during the early evening of each Wednesday, that I am surrounded and infused with grace by so many who will allow me to kneel before them in supplication and hope. Someone, who never, ever imagined that they would say those words—or be “allowed” to say those words—repeats the declarative “The Body of Christ” into my eyes and hands, after having confirmed my hope with assurance: “Receive the healing power of your Creator and Sustainer...”

Sometimes, when I am especially crazy or angry or desperate, I bring the full understanding of the sacrament—half-baked and messy and delicious—back into my soul, and I am able, for a split second, to realize the gift of grace.

Thank you, fellow-priests, for allowing me into your circle of healing.

BIFURCATION

[from Latin *bifurcus*, two-pronged fork]

I speak at a large World AIDS Day observance:

This night, this December 1st of each year, is a night of indescribable emotions and reflection: a time, on the one hand, when we continue to grieve and ponder those names we have honored...and a time, on the other hand, when we celebrate the immense gifts we have been given through those lives.

This is a night of bifurcation, of a split in our hearts and souls between the tears of loss and the joy of companionship.

This is a night of walking in solemn procession for memories that are almost too painful to bear...and yet a night of sacred dance for the lives we have been offered.

This is a night which, for much of my own daily life, is Thanksgiving and Christmas and Lent and Easter all rolled into one defining moment, a moment of what is most devastating and yet most glorious.

This is a night of wandering through the unforgiving demands of the lonely desert...and yet of dancing in the community of love in the Promised Land.

But more than anything else, in my own heart and experience, this is my yearly night of ecstatic *havurah*, that ancient, Aramaic word in Jesus' vocabulary which meant "a company of friends"—a group of people with a common sense of struggle yet hope...of loss yet blessings...of suffering yet discovery...of forgiveness and then acceptance. Just as those who might have had the honor of presence and companionship in the *havurah* of the Last Supper, we, instead, have the honor to stand among this *havurah* of continuing community and dedication.

The sheer joy of this night for me is to have much of my family, my *havurah*, in one room, to be able to look at your faces, to look into your eyes, to know what I have been given by each and all of you; it is my hope and my prayer that you, too, will continue to look into each other's eyes and faces...for there you will find the reflection of your own soul.

This is a night to know that every nook and cranny of this sacred place is filled with souls we cannot see any more, but can feel by their presence: those we have loved and cared for, who have gone on Home to a place of ultimate compassion and rest.

This is a night to remember that there are those throughout Creation who sit in those supposed empty spaces between us, those who carry us in their hearts, and send us words and prayers of encouragement; today I sat and thought of so many throughout this country and beyond who care about our work, our ministry...Companions who are connected to us, and we to them. I thought of a teacher in Minnesota, a social activist in Germany, an order of monks in Oregon, a photographer in Alabama, a widow in Texas, a prisoner in North Dakota, a homemaker in New York, a woman struggling with cancer in Michigan.

I think of last Monday morning when—after a Companion of ours who has a late-night talk-show in Dallas and who mentioned the work and ministry in Tyler—I went to the post office and found our mailbox absolutely packed with letters and notes and cards...and our favorite was an envelope addressed only to "Father Tom Who Helps AIDS Patients in Tyler, Texas"...and it was delivered! But it wasn't about "Father Tom," for that is the only name the person knew from radio; it was, in fact, about all of you who

have brought hope and love to so many folks in East Texas. And inside the envelope were two one-dollar bills, along with an anonymous note which said, “Sorry, this is all I have to send...God bless you all.”

And this afternoon, I thought especially of a 70-something grandmother from Quitman, Texas, who drove herself to Tyler today to stand in the vigil on the town square—this mother who had lost a young son to cancer, this woman who said to me: “I know the pain and the struggle that’s going on here”...this woman with white hair who stood in the middle of Tyler, carrying a sign which read: “It’s not about political or religious exclusion...it’s about Brothers and Sisters who are ill and who need you!”

This is a night to remember all these people...and hundreds and hundreds more who call us and write to us from all over the U.S. in support and encouragement, each of them saying that we are not alone, each of them saying *no* to ignorance and *yes* to *havurah*. And so we are so richly gifted.

This is a night to remember that blessings are not a matter of sitting alone and asking God for favors, but of looking around us to see what we are offered every day of our lives.

This is a night to know that God loves every single soul that He has created in Her cosmic, holy wisdom.

This is a night to feel the sacredness of this assembly, this *havurah*...where, in the radical love and acceptance of the Christ, this room becomes an altar of radical grace, of spiritual freedom, of unmitigated community: a room of such awesome Christness that we can say “AIDS” without shame or fear...where we can know that inclusiveness was and is the cornerstone of the Gospel of Jesus Christ ...where we can openly embrace our brothers and sisters—our *havurah*—without concern or debate about gay or straight, black or white, male or female, rich or poor, infected or not, guilty or innocent, young or old, Christian or Jew or Buddhist or whatever other limiting labels are attached to the children of our Healing God. As long as we exercise this radical freedom of inclusion, as long as we embrace those whom the Christ embraces, as long as we shout the words, “No outcasts!” then we will know the meaning of *havurah*, we will truly know the presence of Christ in our brothers and sisters, and we will forever know the joy of companionship.

This is a night to acknowledge that we are not ultimately in control of our days or nights; to understand that God is God, and we are not; to understand that we are ALL infected with the limitations of human life; that as we minister to others in their sickness, so we are being ministered to in our own finiteness; that as we struggle with others in the midst of medications and clinics and casework and hospitals and vigils and prayers for cures, we are simply—and finally— fellow pilgrims on a common journey, a journey that is full of glory when traveled in *havurah*.

This is a night to say—when asked who has AIDS—“The Body of Christ has AIDS...and we *are* the Body of Christ!”

This is a night to celebrate, in humility and gratitude, the grace which has allowed us to experience unimaginable moments of kindness and servanthood—times when the Christ within each of us is allowed to erupt and flourish into moments of breath-taking memory:

We have seen courage beyond description.

We have witnessed forgiveness, often unexpected, yet granted.

We have heard wisdom—wisdom we need for our own lives—uttered into our

ears from the quiet mouths of young men and women struggling for life.

We have gained friendships like we've never experienced before because they are friendships based on the reality of common struggle, instead of the fantasy of TV sitcoms.

We have learned that commitment in *havurah*, in a company of friends, is a matter of traveling the whole journey together, whatever that may cost in time or energy, for it is in such commitment that the gifts are given and received.

And we have learned, in struggle and death and life, a new and wondrous sense of the Beatitudes which were read tonight.

This is...finally and ultimately...the night of simply being who we are...in *havurah*.

So whatever we do here together, let us do it with the passion of life, with courage and hope.

When we sing...let us sing *loudly*.

When we pray...let us pray *deeply*.

When we wail...let us wail *memorably*.

When we heal...let us heal *inclusively*.

When we embrace...let us embrace *tightly*.

For this is the night which becomes the New Day of all our tomorrows—our tomorrows of being a company of friends—tomorrows of struggle and touch and hope and work and comfort—all of it with each other and with those who will join us next. And that, dear and gentle and beloved hearts, is the gift of God.

BLESS

[from Old English *bledsian*, to consecrate with blood]

I once saw a priest/monk standing on the sidewalk in one of the busiest business sections of San Francisco. I would guess that he was in his early forties, and he had that look to his face that suggested, perhaps, that he had experienced a lot in life, probably some of it pretty painful. Yet that face seemed immensely kind and receptive. It reminded me that some faces (and some hearts and some souls) get kinder and gentler and more receptive after experiencing trauma, while others grow cold and tough and hard from such experiences. I've never been able to predict which way any of us will go.

Besides being drawn to his beckoning face, I was also (in my own craziness) attracted by the outfit worn by this monk: fairly tattered jeans, a sailor's sweater, beat up shoes, and a very used, maroon beret atop his long hair, which was pulled back into a ponytail. In the midst of busy and endless pedestrian traffic, this holy man stood in the middle of the sidewalk, adjacent to a small wooden stand (much like an oaken table you might see near the altar in some old church), and the stand held two objects: a straw basket and—to the side—an old leather pouch/purse. A small sign tacked to the front of the wooden stand announced that he was from Saint Somewhere-or-other, that he was begging for the poor and for those with AIDS.

From the moment I saw this man, I noticed that he was rehearsing a ritual—and the more I saw, the more I realized that it was a magnificent, focused, intense, sacred act. It took my breath away. I was mesmerized. I knew I would never forget it...in its simplicity, its utter seriousness, its extreme joy. I have thought about it—visualized it again—at least two or three times a week for the past several years. I have not been the same.

What I saw was this: as people would pass by, periodically and most nonchalantly dropping coins and bills in the straw basket, this man-monk would slowly take each and every item—even and especially the pennies—one at a time between his burly fingers, raise the individual penny-nickel-quarter-dollar high above his head (as if it were a diamond or the Sacrament) and, with an animated, broad smile, he would bless it, hold it momentarily, and then place it carefully in the leather pouch. Over and over, the intensity was palpable...and stunning.

Much like a character out of an Anthony de Mello legend, I shouted deep inside my Self, "I want what he has; I want what he has learned!" But deeper inside my Self—even to this day—I know that it is simply a matter of attending, of determining what is truly important (the smallest and simplest of things!) and then focusing intently on them. The drama I saw on the sidewalk that day reminded me that I had been taught and conditioned in both church and society to focus and to attend and to celebrate BIG, IMPORTANT THINGS in the world, so that maybe I could self-determine my Self as big and important, too. It takes a long time to let such denial, such Self-destructive pretending, wear off. It helps me to remember the tattered monk on the streets of San Francisco when I'm scared to let any more self-important craziness fall away.

I thought of the street monk this week in the middle of our first Eucharist at the Northeast Texas Treatment Center, as a room full of recovering folks spoke their prayers out loud...held them up high with the same intensity and focus and supplication as that monk with his beloved pennies. Those folks knew— somewhere deep down inside where

BIG and IMPORTANT were giving away to sacred simplicity—that their words were heard and sanctified by others. I wished that the tattered monk had been there with us to witness these blessings...and only later did I realize that he was there, all along, in my heart.

I thought about him again this week, as I stood at the end of the bed of a kind and gentle man who was dying of AIDS in a local nursing home. After saying the Litany and laying my hands on that frail body, listening to his rhythmic searches for breath in these last hours, I knew, at least momentarily, what the monk knew: all we have to give is all we have to give—our attention and our intention. And so I focused as completely as I could on my friend, giving thanks for his life, holding him up for glory and honor and celebration...intending, only and helplessly, to convey my/our presence with him. Had I, instead, been lying in that bed, I know that's all I would want...a simple, attentive sense of presence.

I thought of the nameless monk again this week as I regressed into worry and concern over money and bills, as I foolishly heaped BIG and IMPORTANT upon my shoulders, forgetting to be still and quiet, forgetting to raise the pennies high above my head for thanks and blessings, forgetting to let Grace happen in any way it might, without my prediction or control. Oh yes, the foolishness falls away slowly...just be present, just be *present*...put the joy in the leather pouch...and then disperse it.

I will need to keep this crazy monk near my heart in these next few weeks, as we prepare for the Birthday Party of Christ-mass. As much as I will want to throw THE BIGGEST AND MOST IMPORTANT PARTY EVER, I will struggle to remember that the Original Party was in a back alley, among the poor and dying and recovering and excluded and shamed folks. I will struggle to remember that there were no gold-frankincense-myrrh or Imperial edicts or celestial fireworks, even though we seem to need such legends to give us a sense of holydays. If I can struggle enough to maintain attention and intention, I will be able to visit the back alley of nursing homes and treatment centers and poor infants in swaddling clothes—some of them infected with a virus—and I will know that there is a madman somewhere nearby, joyously blessing pennies held high above his head, giving thanks that the Birthday Party is among the poor...and always will be.

And then if I can possibly quit even the struggling—but simply attend and intend—I will know that I am being given a Gift, wholly holy, that I can celebrate during every day of the year...in the back alleys of souls...and in the splendid memory of a strange monk who *really* knows what a Party is....

CHURCH

[from Greek *kyriakon*, belonging to the Lord]

[*“Well, Father Tom, it’s good to meet you,” the minister said. “Where is your church?”*]

I have confessed often to over-working. And people kid me about it just about every other day. Running from this to that: one hour plastering a wall in a house we’re rehabbing; two hours later sitting in a medical meeting, hearing of patient needs; two hours later, writing some letters of thanks; then finding myself in an emergency room, or receiving a call from the Treatment Center. Constant. But, obviously, I wouldn’t have it any other way—or I *would* have it some other way.

Yet, the six weeks before Christmas seemed immensely packed every moment, from morning to night, with things that had to be done. As the days turned to weeks, I became almost obsessed with Christmas Eve, thinking that it would mark some sort of “break,” some immediate prelude to a week of quiet and rest. Over the years, Christmas Eve has come to be a profoundly spiritual and sacred moment to me, a sense of everything coming together. Yet there had been so many moments already: treasures of Thanksgiving and World AIDS Day and the wondrous Christmas Party for the kids...still, though, I sought the refuge of Christmas Eve.

[*“Father Tom? Yes, I’ve heard your name. Where is your church?”*]

Whether by coincidence or by the often predictable aspect of the Season, there started to be more emergencies. Ociel was becoming intensely ill, and we knew we had to move him to the hospice; Gene had grown weaker and weaker, and we had to find a nursing facility quickly; many other of our dear Companions were being taken to various hospitals. The phone was getting scary to answer. Even in the chaos, I could see some blessings: many of the folks at the Treatment Center had sent Gene a wonderful card, absolutely filled with loving comments and signatures, and Sister Maria immediately put it in a frame for the wall across from his bed; Ociel’s mother was flying in from the West Coast on a plane ticket donated by a “stranger”; various Companions were spending many of their holiday hours visiting the hospitals. I was not alone, I knew, in my fatigue...or in my joy.

[*“Father What?” the car repairman wondered. “Oh...Father Tom. Goodtameetcha. Where is your church?”*]

By 5:30 on Christmas Eve we had sung Christmas carols around the neighborhood; by 6:30 we had celebrated the Eucharist at St. Dismas House, among dear Companions; by 8:00 we had driven to the Northeast Texas Treatment Center to say the Eucharist, with carols and candles and breathtaking warmth of joy and expectation. I stood among these latter folks, each of whom, in a life-saving decision, had chosen intense recovery over Christmas-at-home, and I knew that my expectations for Christmas Eve were being fulfilled in the company of the same saints who attended the back alley Birth in Galilee. I thought of Gene and Ociel and so many others who surrounded us with their spirits.

[*“Father Tom,” the store clerk asked, “where is your church?”*]

The last “event” of the day was at the Lutheran Church, where I had agreed to help the pastor with the late Christmas Eve Eucharist. By the time it ended at 12:30 in the early morning, I was utterly exhausted, not sure if I could literally stand up much

longer...and I fell into bed, hoping for that “long winter nap” I had heard of so many times. But the night was too short...and then there were a few gift exchanges with Mother Mary...and then there was the phone call: Ociel was getting much worse.

[“Oh, Father Tom, it’s so good to see you again,” the nurse’s aid offered with Christmas cheer. “Now tell me again where your church is....”]

I watched, during four days and nights of vigil, as the saints came and went and came back: Cindy and Laurie and Tim and Robin and Joe and Valerie and Sister Maria and Sister Jane and nurses and aides and so many more. I watched as saints ministered to saints...and to Ociel. I watched, this Christmas week, as young Morgan and Christopher would comfort the adults around them, for these little ones hadn’t forgotten that it was Christmas week, even amidst their occasional tears. I acknowledged to Ociel that he was dying, that we had very little time left on this earth to be together, that we needed to say our sayings.

[“Father Tom, I don’t know where your church is,” the old woman in the hallway of hospice said, “but my husband of fifty-eight years would love it if you could offer a prayer.”]

I went back to St. Dismas House many times to check on other folks, and there I found, late in the afternoon, someone I love...someone who is not taking care of himself, someone who loves me even when I don’t take care of *myself*, someone who lives on the streets, who is addicted, who looks at me with soulful eyes and a smile, signaling me that he needs some more food...and, this day, some replacement shoes for those that are falling off his feet. So we commiserate; he looks temporarily angry as he hears of Ociel’s condition; he promises to go see a doctor at the clinic; we both know he won’t. I drive back toward hospice, stopping to see Gene and tell him of his friends, Ociel and the fellow from the streets. Gene smiles at the framed card from his friends at the Treatment Center...and a new, white angel (batteries included) whose wings move back and forth, a gift from a Companion. I can hardly keep my eyes open—my body has never responded well to sleep deprivation—and I lean over to kiss Gene’s cheek.

[“I don’t understand, Father: I see what’s going on here at this House, but I still don’t know where your church is,” the nice woman visitor said when she donated some food.]

Last year, one of Ociel’s young, female relatives had birthed a baby boy. As she loved Ociel so much, she decided to give him the same name. And late Monday, as he weakened even more, Ociel asked if we could baptize the child. We decided on Tuesday morning. Then, in a room absolutely packed with his Hispanic relatives, Ociel watched us perform the drama of water, and I held the child-boy literally in Ociel’s face as I told him that he was now a godfather to his namesake...and he smiled broadly that smile which had illumined St. Dismas for two years. A smile we had taken for granted. This dancer on the face of the earth was smiling again at the child who would carry his name and memory to the next generation.

[“Sure I’ll take a check, Father,” the gas station attendant said. “Where’s your church?”]

I looked rather vacantly at the kind male nurse, as we talked of Ociel, and I questioned out loud that I didn’t know what was keeping our friend alive. There was a pause, we smiled in mutual understanding, and he added, “Of course, he’s waiting to teach us another lesson.” And, of course, he did. In his final hours, Ociel finally let go,

and enacted the words of scripture: “Let the little ones come to me.” Yes, in those last hours, he taught us how we are supposed to be. He asked for a nearby stuffed animal, a white rabbit, and he held it up in front of him...and he cooed and talked to it...in little-boy talk...and then he would put the soft cloth ear of the rabbit in his mouth and chew on it for awhile, until he had something more to tell it. And he would look at us with a smile and a sudden “What?”—as if we could utter a word more sacred than his own. At 5:10 on Thursday morning, after days of saying final things, after days of teaching us The Lesson again and again, he simply stopped breathing, holding his confidante, the soft white rabbit to his cheek.

[“And where is your church, Father Tom?” the funeral director asked.]

The news was broadcast to other Companions; the news was told to the residents at the Treatment Center; the news was offered gently to my friend on the streets; the news was printed in the obituary. All these people, all these places, all these blessings, all these joyful memories, all these tears. A baptism, a vigil, a funeral. A week that was supposed to be quiet and relaxed and restful was, again, a week filled with the immensity of Grace beyond my expectation or planning or control.

Thank God.

[“And lastly, Father,” the reporter asked, “where is your church?”]

In the middle of the day, I fell on my bed, smiling over Ociel with the rabbit to his cheek. Then I slept in the presence of the saints.

POSSIBILITY

[from Latin *possibilis*, to be able]

Our Community is about to embark upon a new ministry—fraught with possibilities of great hope in growth and change for the Companions involved—dependent upon a real commitment of time and energy and investment by all of us.

This ministry of inclusiveness will involve another “population” which has been labeled “outcast” in much of our society...yet, a group of God’s children—like our brothers and sisters struggling with HIV/AIDS—which brings us community and grace.

Through our expanding time and presence with the residents of the Northeast Texas Treatment Center, we have come to realize that there are virtually no facilities in East Texas available to *women* who are leaving drug/alcohol treatment, facilities which might enable a woman to have a “stepping stone” residence for a few months, as she re-enters the demands of day-to-day living in the world. If a woman is wealthy, of course, there are always private-facility options available in various states; but for those women who are poor, who have worked hard in their lengthy recovery program, and who are intent on creating a healthy life, the possibilities in this large geographic area have been close to non-existent. We hope to change that, a step at a time.

Beyond the obvious need just mentioned, we have been able to see a wonderful connection between two “outcast” populations in the past few months. When the large group of residents from the Treatment Center came over at various times last fall to provide volunteer manual labor on our Houses, we realized that friendships were quickly forming between those volunteers and folks living with AIDS. Concern and support and hope began to flower in both directions...and it continues to this day. As the Director of the Treatment Center has said, “There is something mystical going on in all of this.” Such connections lie at the very heart of our hopes for community-building in our society, and we believe that these ministries can offer a model. When a reporter from *USA TODAY* heard of this possibility recently, her response was a more succinct “Wow!”

We have been fortunate to obtain an appropriate and well-placed property: the vacant brick house and garage-apartment which lie adjacent to our St. Francis House, but there’s plenty of need for TLC in terms of patching, painting, heat/air, equipment, and so forth.

As God has taught us, naming is a profoundly important act, a sign of commitment and hope. Consequently, we shall name the new house The Dorothy Day House, in honor of the Twentieth Century saint who co-founded The Catholic Worker movement, whose life work gave us our initial inspiration for ecumenical houses of hospitality. The apartment will be known as Maurin House, in honor of Peter Maurin, who, as co-founder of The Catholic Worker, gave Dorothy Day so much support in their demanding work.

As always, we go into this new work as amateurs.

So did Dorothy and Peter.

CHAOS

[from Greek *khaos*, unformed matter]

The past couple of weeks I've had the privilege of being on lots of peoples' dockets; that is, I've been told by various persons in unique ways how I'm not quite living up to their expectations. Now I'll admit that this process doesn't always feel like a privilege when I'm in the midst of it...but it invariably allows me to take a look at myself and how things are going in community-building. To wit:

A white fellow told me that we're housing and giving too much attention to blacks; a black fellow said that I was biased against blacks.

A gay man told me that I could never understand his life because I am straight; a straight man complained about too many gays hanging around me.

An HIV friend said I could never empathize with the life of the disease; an AIDS friend told me that I was the only one he could talk to about his disease.

Another fellow said that he was not comfortable around St. Dismas because there were so many poor people (and it was in the "bad" part of town); a poor man said I should forget bothering with rich folks.

A self-styled "religious" person said he couldn't believe that I had said a "cuss word" (and, therefore, he didn't want to be around me); another fellow was turned off by my title, "Father," as too religious.

A fairly new friend said he couldn't attend Sharing Group anymore because he didn't think I (as the convener) should share my own emotions; another friend suggested that I never showed my real emotions to the Group.

A priest said that, due to my ordination and the demands of canon law, I should be more involved with the Diocese; another offered me the admonition to officially leave the Church.

One Companion said that I was getting too strict on behavioral rules; another was angry that I hadn't been tough enough.

An angry Companion opined that the Order was "probably getting rich" from donations; a dear friend harangued me for not having "big fund-raising drives" because we were always broke.

Another child of God told me that I had no business ministering to recovering persons unless I had an active 12-step program in my life; another recovering person asked me to listen to their Fifth Step.

So...if Dr. Scott Peck *is* correct in his theory of community-building—that resurrection is the ultimate gift out of chaos—then we must be doing something right!

COMMUNITY

[from Latin *communitas*, a people together]

To the best of my understanding from reading (and being stunned by) Scott Peck's beautiful book, *The Different Drum*—and then all of that time in workshops with him—the basic premise of community-building is that universal journey by virtually *any* group or organization through the steps of *pseudo-community*, *chaos*, the “fork in the road,” *emptying*, *depression*, and *resurrection*. Obviously, this passage is not unlike the steps of grieving death or change, as described by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance). In Scotty's paradigm, though, I think the steps are perhaps more easily recognized as *group* steps, rather than individual road markers.

Pseudo-community, I understand (I think), is that stage and time of safe, comfortable mingling with others in our world: “How you doing?” “What's up?” “How are the wife and kids?” “Reverend, your sermon was wonderful!” “How about this weather!” And so forth. There's nothing wrong with it: it's day-to-day stuff that keeps us social, somewhat connected, fairly undefensive, reasonably calm and sane. There is, of course, little intimacy or depth to the relationships.

Chaos appears to be that moment in a group when the “accepted standards” of pseudo-community are broken: when someone offers an opinion, a comment, a blurt, a reaction that causes defenses/offenses to arise, when we try all of our tricks to somehow make it all go away...or change another person into us...or at least show “them” the errors of their thoughts and/or emotions.

Then comes that infamous “fork in the road,” when a group will make the vital, pivotal decision—somehow—to either “get organized” (i.e., form committees to make the chaos go away—as many organizations like churches might do) or face the dreaded journey down the road toward actual community.

Emptying is a painful/joyful experience down that road. It happens when folks begin to realize that they're not going to change or fix their fellow pilgrims...and so they begin to declare their own struggles, their own needs, their own sense of frustration and failure...slowly, difficultly letting go of longstanding biases, prejudices, fears, barricades...slowly “bracketing” their own needs, expectations, and control, finally to be able to listen to others—to the circle—rather than only to their own voices.

Depression is an invariable result of emptying, with the deep recognition that we are not in control of the group (or universe!), that realization that *nothing* will likely transform the group into a homogeneous, think-alike, act-alike, feel-alike, look-alike fraternity or sorority. This cloudy, personal, difficult time is likened, perhaps, to that scream of “Why have You forsaken me!” and the metaphor of “crucifixion” can be deeply felt. In that despair, there seems to be no answer in the valley of the shadow of death.

Somehow—and I've never quite been able to ascertain how it happens or why it seems to invariably happen—there is a realization that the only possibility for *resurrection* is finally to *let go*, to allow *inclusiveness* to be the cornerstone of the group. When it finally happens, there is a new life, a new world of cooperation to the group, that is stunning to experience and behold.

That final phase of community-building—*true* community—is not a pie-in-the-

sky concept, for it comes after a good deal of process and “suffering.” And it is really only in that state of mind or heart that I think we can really get hold of the meaning of inclusiveness. Now I *don't* mean the type of inclusiveness that we try to portray on Brotherhood Sunday or some other PR bash...or the “mood” of acceptance that we might find in a certain song or story or greeting card. I'm talking about the gut-level, down-and-dirty, teeth-gnashing sort of inclusiveness: that is, including those I *don't* want to include, either in my neighborhood or political party or church or nation or universe. You know...“them.”

A recent case in point comes to mind. We were informed that there was going to be a “neighborhood meeting” in a nearby church (that sounded nice and pleasant), but one of the topics for the discussion (in fact, *the* topic) was going to revolve around “concerns” that there were too many HIV/AIDS folks living in this section of the Kingdom of God...and that we were somehow supposed to “explain” ourselves.

A group of us (some “infected” and some not) arrived at the meeting site, and I had every intention of being calm and collected, ready to answer questions and disseminate information...to explain, I hoped, that our various Houses were really only homes, places of residence for lots of different folks, not all of whom were HIV infected—and then to calmly suggest that one's illness or lack of it has nothing to do with one's right to be a resident in a neighborhood house.

And *boom*, we were suddenly in the midst of it...of misinformation, neighborhood gossip, charges and counter-charges, raised voices. I found myself talking very loudly, reminding people of civil rights, declaring our refusal to debate whether anyone has the right to live anywhere as a private citizen. One gentleman suggested that only “families” (which he later defined as husband/wife/2-3 children) had any right to occupy space in this area. And then voices of whites, blacks, Hispanics blended into a cacophony of disagreement and chaos, with pleas for order and quiet and calm discussion going unheeded and largely ignored. We left the meeting to return to a Sharing Group at St. Dismas...and I realized that we were smack-dab in the middle of community-building, whether we liked it or not!

I thought long and hard for a couple of days, then realized that I not only liked what had happened, but I hoped that it would happen again in the future. *Because it's been going on for ten-thousand years...*and it really *is* a sign of community and common struggle. I remembered moments of being in community-building groups with Scotty, moments when folks debated/argued/fumed/disagreed about all sorts of issues and personal opinions, only to struggle on later to a sense of acceptance, if not agreement. With those memories, I knew that if we can debate and argue and differ in all of our diversities, and yet not exclude or banish, then we are living out the promise of true community and resurrection.

I fully realized, of course, that the gentleman who had challenged our neighborhood presence really, truly doesn't want anyone “different” to live nearby. And I—given a perfect, comfy little world—would probably prefer not to live near someone who espoused a logic of neighborhood “cleansing.” But neighborhoods—or churches or political parties or civic organizations—are not for the purpose, really, of choosing correct thoughts and opinions, of exclusion or intimidation or cleansing.

I have never been in a neighborhood (even those in “wealthy” areas where “exclusive” is broadly advertised or where guarded entrances have everything but

machine guns) or in a parish or in a public group in which everyone “liked” each other, agreed with each other, or shared with each other. Ever. Yet in many of those same clusters of human beings, I have seen immense energy and talent put to the task of making things homogenized and pure—and, ultimately, exclusive. That’s likely what Peck calls “getting organized”: when any kind of community group finds itself in utter chaos, the choice is often to organize the majority into a power group to exclude the minority. And it never really works because the reigning majority will have “peace” for only a short time, until they find that they, too, have differences.

A few years ago I was involved in a heated debate during a diocesan convention. Before the debate began, the bishop had given a stirring sermon on the “family” of the diocese, and many hearts were warmed by the seeming inclusiveness of “church family” metaphors. Yet, in the debate itself, there was no safety for dissenting “family members” to offer their differing views...and after the final vote was taken, the minority voters were clearly shunned, personally, by the majority. As I left the auditorium, I passed an old friend—a kind priest who had served this “family” for almost forty years—and there he was, leaning against the lobby wall, mumbling into space, “Family? Family! Now *that’s* a dysfunctional family!”

And so it goes in many of our social and political and religious institutions and groups these days. Instead of open discussion—with a spirit of agreeing to disagree, yet accepting ourselves as fellow members of a heterogeneous, vibrant community—we seek to exclude, vilify, shame, and shun. And again, we know that ultimately it simply doesn’t work.

Are there limits to inclusiveness? Of course there are. But that’s part of the very process of community-building: of struggling together to reach some kind of consensus, in community, as to what makes sense for the community itself. Those boundaries are always scary, though, because of our desire to have that perfect, comfy little world. Yet, after struggle and debate and chaos and emptying, I think we can conclude that which is beyond positive community life. In the situation I have mentioned, I believe the local neighborhood knows that crack and other illicit drugs, handguns, robbery and burglary are simply not things we can survive as neighbors. But even those boundaries cannot be identified until we are willing to suffer through the process of community-building.

No, true community—involving the pain and the utter joy of inclusiveness—does not resurrect out of presidential politics or campaign rhetoric or easy, simple answers to human diversity. It comes out of the trenches of parish or neighborhood or family, where we say YES to unthreatening debate, YES to the toil of consensus-building, YES to the possibility of inclusiveness.

Throughout the gospel narratives, the disciples were constantly struggling with each other and with Jesus. Almost to the point of fist-fights. And often, just as they were on the brink of splitting up, of excluding each other in their chaos, Jesus would offer a way—emptying—by which they could find true community and inclusiveness once again.

I was once asked by a parish how they could possibly choose their new pastor from a group of seven equally-qualified candidates. I suggested that the seven candidates be put in a room for twelve hours, with no agenda, with a convener who knew something about community-building...and at the end of that time the candidates themselves would know who was meant to be pastor in that place. The parish, of course, didn’t follow my

suggestion, but decided to “get better organized” with their search-committee; eighteen months later, they were searching yet again.

Life is hard.

Community-building is difficult.

Resurrection is worth the struggle.

CONVERGE

[from Late Latin *convergere*, to incline together]

In the Sunday/ Weekend section of *USA TODAY*, the announcement (which we already knew was coming) was made: The residents of the Northeast Texas Treatment Center in Overton were being honored nationally for the work and spirit they had offered to this Community during “Make A Difference Day” last October. Along with that award came a special donation to our Community.

It all began with the idea of a resident named Gary: to offer community service to a local social program, and then write of the experiences to the national newspaper. He took his idea to the staff members of the facility, and they encouraged him to proceed. And proceed he did! Within a short time, a trip had been organized and planned—and, in late October, over thirty-five folks showed up for a wonderful Saturday of hard work, new relationships, spiritual connections, and great fun.

As the day progressed, the ideals for community-building seemed to flourish before our eyes. Folks with HIV, folks in recovery, folks who had been recently homeless, folks who were recuperating from some of life’s toughest battles—all seemed to converge into mutual manual labor, glorious conversations, wonderful picnics, and lives which would never quite be the same again.

At the end of the day, we formed a LARGE circle of connected hands and hearts on the front lawn of St. Dismas House...and there—amid curious stares of passing neighbors and cruising police cars—we spoke out loud of what we had just experienced...and we offered prayers and tears of joy...and participated in probably the largest hug-in ever held in North Tyler!

Gary proceeded with his story to the newspaper (there were *over 10,000* stories written to the paper about activities around the country that day!), and then, a few months later, we received a few lengthy interview calls from a reporter with *USA TODAY*. And finally, we were informed that our magical day had been chosen as one of the fifty finalists...which also meant that our Order would receive a \$2,000 donation from the Paul Newman Foundation.

We are so deeply honored and touched by the many gifts we were offered in all of this. The donation will help, of course, with lots of remaining bills we have, connected to the opening of our residence for women in recovery. But, more than anything, we celebrate the memories of that day, of the enduring spirit and relationships which were birthed, of the love and grace we are still offered through the Center...weekly trips of volunteers to help on our Houses...great pizza parties after hard work together...and the magic circle of sharing our struggles and joys, just before the van heads back to the Center. Another new ritual for our Community, another gift we couldn’t have imagined.

Thank you, dear hearts, for becoming—so generously—our Companions.

MISTAKE

[from Old Norse *mistaka*, to take in error]

What a wondrous—and complicated!—couple of months it has been.

Gifts of grace and learnings and bending egos and sudden changes and soap-opera-rumors and newspaper articles...and, finally, the miraculous witness of Companions—some recent-some veterans, some men-some women—working together in chaos to forge a corner of the Kingdom and the kindom on a side street in East Texas.

My own ego got bent a bit, but only after I wrestled with it, trying to keep it straight and pure for my own satisfaction...and ultimately realizing, in a night of discontent, that my gut is usually a better arbiter of reality than my rigid ego.

It was a Monday night at the end of March, and I was fairly exhausted after weeks of working on the house we were renovating to be the first residence for women in recovery. We had had so much help: not only the residents from the Treatment Center putting in hundreds of hours with the painting/plumbing and other such stuff, but also many Companions working to find furnishings and equipment.

But as we began to move things into the house that day—in feverish anticipation of our first residents arriving on the following Sunday—my gut began to tighten into a knot. I tried to ignore it at first (as I do sometimes when it's trying to send me a message I don't particularly want to hear, given that my ego is telling me that everything's cool in my self-controlled world), but it tightened and tightened throughout that day of frenetic activity.

As afternoon became evening and then night, I tried to fool my gut by using the panacea of sleep, hoping beyond hope that my body would get a delayed brain-message that I had made all the "right" decisions, if only because I wanted to make all the decisions *perfectly*. But in the wee hours of the night, after I had memorized and/or counted the symmetrical patterns of acoustical tiles in the bedroom ceiling endless times, I found myself pacing the floor of MaryHouse, talking to myself in alternating dialogues of relaxation and anxiety. It was around 2:30 in the morning that the epiphany crashed through my super-ego, ego, id and all other defense mechanisms that Freud and his cohorts ever imagined—and there it was, so boldly writ that even I could see it: GREAT GRACE—WRONG PLACE!

It took me another half-hour of pacing to de-code the message (which didn't need to be de-coded), to realize that the house we had been working on for the past six weeks wasn't big enough to adequately accommodate this new program for women. But how would I tell that to all my co-volunteers, my friends, my Companions? So it took even another half-hour to try to forgive myself for switching horses in mid-stream, to talk out loud in the dark living room air about changes we had to make which would affect the entire Community. Oh God, I thought, everyone's going to beat me up—maybe even worse than I've beat myself up. Even with all the trust I'm given every day of my life in this Community, I somehow couldn't imagine, in those dark hours, that folks would trust my last-minute perceptions...well, let's face it: my ego short-circuited my heart's understanding of the grace-full Companions who surround me.

The long and the short of all that was simply that my bent-ego finally realized the obvious: that the House that had originally been designed for group living—St. Dismas House—was now almost empty of residents (due to other available housing that we and

others had developed); and so, *this* was the place to begin our new program for women in recovery! I knew, too, that Dismas would still be a place of hospitality, of group meetings, of sacred liturgies—and I knew especially that the spirit of life in those walls which had given hope to so many in the past would now enliven the spirits of these new Companions. My heart was able to take back the night...and I was, at last, able to put my ego to sleep for a few, short hours.

The next day, in our weekly advisory-committee meeting, I announced my decision, and that group of kindly folks concurred, offering (as usual!) great mercy on my soul. Then the flurry of repainting, rearranging, and adapting began. Within five days, as a whole bunch of good folks helped with lots of details, we were ready for our first residents to arrive.

And so they did. We now have the first five women among us...women who have already brought us vessels of grace and hope...women—some from various treatment facilities, some from isolated, quiet despair—who are present among us as exclamations of new vitality and commitment, allowing me to understand, yet once again, how silly and trivial and desperate my ego can become...and how important it is for me to listen to those grace-full messages from my “gut,” that place of primal understandings, that place where the Spirit first tries to help us discover the real hope of life: GREAT GRACE, RIGHT PLACE!

Now we celebrate all the goodness which has come our way: wonderful women who, perhaps, wish to claim a new way of living among us; Companions who are sharing their talents and energies to make this work; greater community among folks—whether “HIV” and/or “recovering” and/or rich-poor-male-female-young-old— sharing together in meals and groups and new relationships...folks who might have never known the joy of *mutual* struggle.

And, of course, the continuing learnings by (and the endless gifts to) a struggling priest: that life is full of healthy and productive possibilities...that the Kindom is a matter of daily change and growth...that grace is abounding and surrounding us in our trials-and-errors...that some words from our weekly Healing Rite are well-worth memorizing: *Thanks be for the companionship of others, for the love we are given, for the gentle touches that we receive....*

RADICAL
[from Latin *radix*, root]

I write a “memo” to my Companions (and, certainly, to *myself*):

As we begin our fourth year of ministry in East Texas, I think it important that we remember and rehearse the commitment we made to ourselves and to our community when we opened the door of St. Dismas House on May 9, 1993. On that day, I was alone in that House; I had worked pretty much alone for about forty-five days to renovate the House, and that time allowed me to look into my own soul...and to think (and pray) about what we might create in this place. Even though many of you were not “here” at that time, your soul-full presence was only a matter of arriving physically.

In the newsletter that month, I reminded our Companions of a statement I had read by a wonderful priest (now deceased) who said simply that if we were to live with the poor, the outcast, the brothers and sisters of Jesus, then we would do well to plan nothing...to sit and wait...to listen intently...and then respond to what we heard. I believe that we’ve tried very hard to do that, imperfectly of course. But we have heard some messages: from those living with HIV/AIDS, from those living in recovery, from those who have experienced a lifetime of poverty and “benign neglect” (as the politicians like to call it).

Our responses have been what we thought the messages indicated; others will have to decide in their own hearts and souls whether our efforts have been helpful and adequate. Some folks might have made different decisions or established different priorities. For our part, we have done only that which we could do—given who we are, given our gifts and limitations. We are grateful for the grace and blessings we have been given in return by so many.

Now, as we proceed with our ongoing process of listening and responding, I hope that we will maintain a consensus about some vital aspects of our life and ministry together. I hope that we will remember and declare that the Gospel is a living statement of the *radical* nature of the life and mission of the Christ, that it calls us to a life that is upside-down and backwards to almost everything we are taught to value and perceive in the “normal” world of day-to-day living; that to live out the glories that are offered in the Gospel may cost us the “acceptance” we usually seek in the “real” world...that we may be ridiculed, shunned, rejected, made fun of—and all sorts of other social judgments—if we are to stand with those who are excluded and reviled; that we are called to be present...to be present in the best way we can—not as an “agency,” not as “experts” and/or “professionals,” nor to be too sure of ourselves or preoccupied with self-promotion—but to struggle for that presence which means openness and grace; that we are called to recognize that our presence together becomes a matter of community, of *Havurah* (a company of friends)—that we are, in essence, a village, a tribe, a discipleship of the Christ; that to offer—and live—the possibilities of presence and hospitality does not imply an acceptance of destructive, addictive behaviors by ourselves, our Companions, or our guests; that the Gospel calls us to risk failure, to risk holy foolishness, to risk the blessings of the Beatitudes; that we are called by the Gospel to live as awakened adults—instead of perpetual, social adolescents—even as we remember the innocence of the little children within us; that the struggle to live in community will always churn up our deepest ego-needs, our desire to control everything and everyone around us—just as such

community-building often led the apostles into continuing chaos...and growth; that we are called by the Gospel to be in sacred community with the *anawim* (those who are powerless and ignored by the world), and that such solidarity will certainly bring us social derision, yet new-found joy; that as the Gospel reminds us—with the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman and other pilgrims—that we are called to be ecumenically and spiritually inclusive of all God's children, even as churches and other institutions demand that we be spiritually arrogant; that we are led to live in intentional-simplicity—as the lilies of the field—fearing not for tomorrow's needs, but offering thanks for what we are so freely offered.

I have been taught many wondrous things (some of which I didn't want to learn!) by this Community in these past years, and I am truly blessed by that. I hope you will guide and mentor and lead me with more wisdom in the future. The Gospel is—finally—awe-full...and much of my own awe, in our common struggles, comes from the Christ I experience in each of you...one day at a time.

I thank you from my deepest heart.

SCARY

[derived from Old Norse *skjarr*, timid]

A Resident-Companion leaves a note for us:

Things seem to be really working out for me here so far. I have felt lost the majority of my life, and I wish you could have seen me two months ago—I was in horrible shape. Absolutely hopeless. I felt abandoned by everyone and everything, including God. Never in my life have I experienced the feelings I feel now. When I walked through this door, I knew it was for me. Spiritual relief came, and much anger left. It was a miracle. God seems to have some sort of plan for me, and this is a place I'm happy he has led me. Anxiety creeps in on me still, and I tend to get overwhelmed easily. I still am scared and nervous, but I know I will be taken care of...I have learned that having an open mind is a wonderful thing, but can be scary. I'm learning that I might have gifts that I can share with many others when I am stronger. I am really thankful for this place and the support I get....

CHANGE

[from Latin *cambir*, to barter]

A good friend, whom we had not seen in a few months, wandered into St. Dismas House the other day, and, after an hour or so, said, “Boy, things sure aren’t the same around here anymore!” He seemed rather forlorn and lost in the thought. No, he’s not HIV+; he’s a recovering addict, and he’s been among us for a long time...and in the grace-full mystery of this place, many of his dearest friends had AIDS...and therefore he’s seen a lot happen, just as many of us have.

As I heard his comment, it was one of those moments that all of us have experienced in life: when it seems that a thousand thoughts shoot through our mind in an instant. All of a sudden, I wanted to say all sorts of things to him...but I knew it really wouldn’t be helpful in the moment.

I wanted to say, “Well, yeah, things really aren’t the same—we’ve lost *almost a hundred* of our friends to AIDS in the past couple of years!”

I wanted to say, “Yeah, we’d better get a good hold on what death and addictions and loss can do to us...and then grieve it as best we can!”

I wanted to say, “Yeah, but think of all the wonderful gifts of love and memories we were given by Jerry and Donnie and Susan and Terry and Kim and George and Rusty and Ociel and Bill and Carey, and all those other wonderful folks we sat with and prayed with and laughed with and...”

I wanted to say, “Yeah, and they’re all still with us...we’re still breathing their atoms...and they are dancing in common celebration with us for so much that we had, for so much that we *still* have...”

I wanted to say, “Yeah, and there’s folks *now* who are living and dying and recovering in our midst...and we’ve lost 78 blessed, gentle folks...and we’ve got to dance in the here and now.”

I wanted him (and me!) to know that it was still okay to cry or laugh in this place...and I wanted him (and me!) to not miss the present—the holy, the sacred, the joy—by pretending from the past.

But more than anything else, I wanted to say, “Yeah...change is part of the deal here...###cause we can’t control any of it...and that’s why some folks can’t be here or work here ###cause they *know* that change is part of the deal...and we can pretend away death and hurt and loss and relapse...we can get angry and try to ignore change...we can stomp off in loud disappointment ‘cause we couldn’t stop change...we can go away to try to hide our sense of smallness in the immensity of it all...or we can summon up whatever courage we have, whatever courage we form in community—and maybe even set aside our egos for awhile—in order to get on with the work.”

All of that, of course, would come off to this gentle young man as yet more sermonizing—good for nothing, arrogant and distancing to a soul who was struggling through his own sense of loneliness and abandonment and addictive-remorse. And so I actually said (with a deep breath to summon my own soul), “Yeah, well, I’m glad for what we’ve had...and I’m glad for what we’ve got now” (and then, more to the point of his *real* hopes) “...and, hey, how’ve you been doing...you still clean and sober, brother?”

I watched him over the next few days. I watched him come and go. I watched him re-test the waters of hospitality. I watched him hover on the edge of group

discussions, hot dog cookouts, and community silliness. I watched him start some conversations with new faces but common stories. I watched his eyes move from person to person, seeking the looks and habits of his now-gone friends in the skin-lines of these “other” folks. I watched him rehearse all the words and behaviors that you and I use when we’re wondering again, after change and loss, if there’s really, truly anyone on the face of the earth who cares if we’re alive or dead. You know, anyone who *really* cares. I watched him re-connect with an older woman who might parent him with a soft shoulder and a beckoning acceptance. I watched him check me out to see if “change” had brought exclusion or rejection...and, again, I was reminded of all the tricks we all know to use, rather than simply asking out loud: “*Do you still love me as I am? Will you still accept me as I am?*” He couldn’t imagine, I guess, that hospitality is reciprocal...that I want this frazzled young man in my disjointed, disordered life as much as he feels he needs me and us. So I just told him that I loved him...and maybe that’s why he was trying to re-connect anyway.

But watching all of it—being a part of all of it—I knew again that he had gifted me with the oft-forgotten sacred commitment of this Community: Hey, man, everything’s changed! And oh, by the way, nothing’s changed a whit.

WATCH

[from Old English *waeccan*, to observe carefully]

“Hey, mister, do you have the time to watch me get around this guy?”

I was standing by the work van in front of St. Dismas House. I was working on the House—bedecked in my carpenter’s belt, construction boots—sweating like a pig in the Texas sun, wanting to simply grab the circular saw and get on with the task at hand. This eleven year-old boy didn’t have a clue who I was or what I was doing, but he was playing basketball with two other boys in our driveway; what he wanted from me—a grown man—was to watch him go one-on-one with a bigger boy, to have me see him “get around this (other) guy” and make a basket. He did. And I gave him a good cheer and a touch to his shoulder, and, as I turned back to the van, he followed his glory with, “Could you watch me again?”

Perhaps it was that kid; perhaps it was the memory of July 23 that stuck in my brain for too many days into August; perhaps it was that disorganized crowd of adolescent boys in Detroit; perhaps it was the news that a pro basketball player had signed a contract for \$123,000,000; perhaps it was watching bits of the Olympics and noticing that the real competition was between the Republic of Reebok and the Nation of Nike; perhaps it was the sound-bytes of the “political dialogue” on welfare “reform;” perhaps it was a soul-full cacophony of all that stuff, but I knew that something was brewing in my gut. Gut-wrenching stuff.

The night of July 23, 1967, will be etched on my emotional map for the rest of my life. My wife and eight-month-old daughter and I had just moved into the ghetto on Detroit’s east side. I was a month or so out of seminary, twenty-five years old, just ordained a deacon in the Church, assigned, on a special fellowship, to an inner-city parish because the bishop couldn’t imagine that I’d last more than ten minutes in the suburbs.

I was eager—and ready, I thought—to take on the woes and throws of urban despair and blight. Late into that night, though, I got a taste of reality beyond my expectations, for I discovered around midnight—right out of a dead sleep—that our neighborhood (and much of downtown Detroit) was on fire.

It would take volumes, of course, to record what I experienced and saw over the next two weeks (if you wish to pursue that, see my first book, *Go Back, You Didn’t Say May I*); please accept, though, that there were images and impressions which changed my view of reality forever: of “right and wrong,” of justice and hope and truth and redemption and “haves” and “have-nots” and frustration and expectations. All I knew in the ensuing weeks, though, was that things were going from bad to worse, and that I had virtually no power or control over any of it on a social scale—and that’s a damned good (but impossible) learning for a 25-year-old hotshot-wannabe to learn and digest.

Several weeks into autumn, amid burned-out neighborhood buildings and endless meetings of “civic (and scared) leaders” trying to find some way to threaten-punish-control the urban poor for this outrageous display of enough-is-enough unrest, I found myself confronted by a group of about seven adolescent boys who were shooting baskets in the dilapidated parish gym: “Hey, Father,” one of them offered, “what are the chances of you coaching us for a team in the city-wide church basketball league?” I knew only two of them very well, and realized they didn’t know much about me, as I notified them that I didn’t know much of anything about the theories of basketball, that I would

probably hit both of my feet if I tried to dribble a ball, and I really didn't know if we had the skill to make it in that very competitive league.

"Well, we've got *George!*" they exclaimed in one voice. And there was George standing about ten feet away by himself, weighing in at probably ninety-eight pounds at six-foot tall, evidencing an embarrassed but pleased smile. Jesse, whom I knew well and therefore would give the needed seal-of-approval, said, "Show him, George." George picked up a ball, went to the middle of the floor, and proceeded to swish a basket from about a million feet away. Then to another spot and another swish. And again. Then a hard drive to the basket for a lay-up, almost slamming it in pre-slamming days. Fourteen years old, poor as poor could get in that city at that time, with dreams of church-league glories.

"And we've got Ramone," Jesse added, as Ramone displayed several fancy dribbles for effect. "And the rest of us ain't too bad either!" In a few moments' time, I convinced them that they would have to play and coach themselves, that I would be along to drive the car and sit on the bench as titular leader...and I could cheer *very* loudly. They, in turn, convinced me to enter the league application...and—oh, by the way, scrounge up some money for team shirts, emblazoned with "MESSIAH" on the front. Done deal.

The competitive story is something out of a sports movie: they burned up the ball courts in Detroit. When in doubt, let Ramone take the ball up court—and, of course, pass it to George—anytime, every time. Swish. Swish. Suddenly it seemed, we were at the winter league banquet, cocky as champions, with applause even for the supposed coach. But we knew who the real coach and star was.

The following June, the fellowship ran out, and I was "recruited" and hired by a large, well-known, upper-class parish in New Jersey as Associate Rector. In-parish therapy programs and all the rest, amidst the growing devastation of adolescent drugs, Vietnam, assassinations, urban unrest. I worked my butt off...and was fired ten months later.

In those months, I tried to keep up with the kids—the team—in Detroit. They didn't go back to the church league. George was being watched already by college scouts. Jesse wanted to come live with us. Ramone got into some trouble. And drugs were becoming big-time in Detroit, even as nothing much interested the civic leaders in renewal, change, or rebuilding.

As years followed, George went to college, became an All-American, and made the pro scouts drool. The timid kid had put on height and weight as well as a tough attitude. Jesse had his tuition paid by a kind person for a special school, and later came to live with us in California. Ramone went to prison. A couple of the other guys got strung out. One went to work on the assembly line at Chrysler.

George actually became a household word in the homes of America, was the highest scorer in the NBA, and generally continued to live the storybook life, including lots of bucks. This year he was honored by inclusion in the Hall of Fame. Jesse got into drugs. Ramone was wounded in a shoot-out. I lost contact with the rest of the team. On a visit to Detroit in the late 70's, the neighborhood was in worse shape than in '67, thanks to rampant unemployment, ubiquitous drugs, and a growing theory of "benign neglect" by local and national leaders. The parish was finally being led by a good, energetic, committed, black priest who formed a housing corporation to rehab lots of buildings in

the area.

Staring at a mid-fifties birthday recently, I asked myself what I learned from all those memories, from the political mean-spiritedness of this past year, from living in the struggle of community recovery, from living in this smaller version of the Detroit ghetto, from that kid in the St. Dismas driveway who wanted me—a stranger/father—to watch him make his moves.

I guess I've learned that the blooming of a George may be celebrated, but it's a million-to-one blooming in the landscape of American poverty. The Georges are outrageously rare in ultimate talent and fortune, while the Jesses and Ramones are generically ignored in their possibilities, plowed under as useless weeds, not worthy, somehow, of nurturing and investment. Our billions go for smart-bombs, not smart kids.

I guess I've learned that the millions of Jesses and Ramones and the rest of the team members are not going to get out of the ghetto, simply because they are the *anawim*, the unheard. And they will be politically and socially punished and blamed for not being Georges. And their wives and sisters and children will receive the same mantle of anger and shame, whether they are black, brown, white, or some other hue of the abandoned garden.

I guess I've learned that crucifixion will continue in my society and world, that it will often be painful to watch, that we will try to prevent it whenever possible, but we will be reminded that we are extremely powerless in the face of profoundly powerful economic/political/religious forces around us. In our social denial, we are certainly replanting the seeds of Detroit, Newark, Watts...and one day we will gasp in national horror, "How on earth did this happen again?" And the *anawim* will be punished again.

But I guess I've learned, too, a sense of joy and celebration in the convulsions and conclusion to all this: that the blessing is in not counting on the storybook, but staying with the *anawim*...living, struggling in day-to-day solidarity, counting on the simple things of life, praying for our release from the captivity of equating "rich" with material stuff or fake status, learning to know and value the moments of watching a kid make some moves in a driveway court...and watching him again next year...and the next...dedicated only to loving him deeply, even (and especially) when he stumbles, as we do, even when he doesn't become an NBA All-Star.

"Hey, mister, wanna watch me..." Good God, what an honor! And what a blessing.

NURSE

[from Latin *nutricius*, nourishing]

When I was a young boy—in the so-called “Golden Age” of television—I saw a show or movie that made an indelible impression on me...I don’t remember the name of it or the players involved in portraying it...and, truly, I don’t know why it tattooed its imprint on that pre-adolescent mind or heart. Yet, at least once a week, in the turmoil and pilgrimage of this Community, that drama replays—in parts and snippets—on the screen of my certain and/or confused consciousness.

The drama involved wounded U.S. soldiers—I assume from the Korean Conflict—who were suffering or healing in a sort of off-the-front-lines military hospital, staffed mainly by sweet, caring nurses who offered gentle care and comfort and deep sympathy. But there was one nurse labeled—in dislike and derision—as the “ward nurse”: a woman of disciplined character, a sense of remoteness (intended...or the response to her behavior?), isolated by other staff members, and seemingly *unsympathetic* to the stark travails of her patients. It was difficult, I remember, to even watch this character with any sense of empathy or understanding, as she demanded or required this or that from patients and fellow staff members. She was seemingly unliked, undaunted, and insensitive to the profound struggles of others.

As the scenario continued—in hints of dialogue and situation—it became more clear that, as the other nurses provided the “traditional” duty of palliative comfort to these ravished, wounded men, it was this “ward nurse” who got the soldiers out of their depression and immobility—helped get them whole again—through her incessant demands to get out of the sick bed and back into life. By play’s end, this viewer (at least) respected not only her willingness to commit to the role of “bad guy,” but—more importantly—her positive effect on the well-being of others.

Weekly (daily?), then, I ponder my/our role with those who arrive among us wounded and forlorn...seemingly seeking health and new life, yet outwardly asking only for some quiet comfort.

Comfort? I then remember a section of the famous Bayeux Tapestry in France, the section in which the text says, “The King comforteth his troops”...yet the graphic shows the King prodding the soldiers’ butts with his sword! I look up the word “comfort” in the dictionary, and it says “from Late Latin *confortare*, to strengthen greatly”...and I see how we might have mitigated the essence of that word over these centuries.

I tend to prod. Whether it’s the dark side or the light side of my character, I know not. But—whatever the intentions of that “ward nurse”—I perceive it as a matter of respect...of respecting the gifts and abilities of people to grow and heal and blossom, even if they (or *I*) have forgotten—or never been told of—those gifts and abilities.

Am I to be a “Fr. Tom” out of an old Bing Crosby flick—always ready with a song and a smile? Am I to be a priestly incarnation of the “ward nurse”? Or somewhere in between—“leaning toward balance,” as our poster says?

Perhaps, finally, Popeye was right: “I yam what I yam.” I prod in respect, knowing that the results can be equivocal. Pilgrims—rich folks, poor folks, wounded folks, seeking folks—come through this sacred place, often expecting a new guru or special shrink or Bing-Crosby-character who will “comfort” them (current connotation) rather than “comfort” them (original meaning), providing some magic potion, rather than

prodding toward self-health. And many of them leave sadly, to pilgrimage on to another site of magic and miracle-cures and...well, who knows?

I try to remind myself that when I am set up as a new icon or idol, I am being rendered in clay. When the leave-taking is especially vindictive or vitriolic or shaming, I can easily feel wounded and forlorn myself—wanting to lie in a bed surrounded by sympathetic, sensitive comforter—and that’s the moment when I need a ward nurse to show up and exclaim, “Hey, get your butt out of bed...your wounds are healing!”

SOLIDARITY

[from Latin *solidus*, unity]

A letter arrives—grace-full and timely—perhaps to allay, even temporarily, my continuing angst about “how” we should be doing all of this:

I’ve been a receiver of your services and your caring for a couple of years now, and a lot of the time I feel guilty that I don’t “give back” enough...but I’m doing the best I can (I guess!) to stay alive with this disease of HIV and this disease of addiction. In fact I’m doing pretty damned good. Part of that (maybe a lot of that) is due to your support and love of me (when I would *let* you love me).

I try not to get mad (you know, MAD) about things ‘cause it doesn’t do much good for either of my diseases. But I do get mad when I see or hear lack of support or criticism of what you all do. Then I want to get on a loudspeaker and tell the world the truth.

So just remember not to give up on us, regardless of how many punches you take.

Don’t let people make you think or feel that you’re less-than!

Don’t let these Bible-belt churches beat you up with their “religious” stuff!

Don’t let the rich folks try to bribe you into inaction!

Don’t let “recovery experts” work their disease on you!

Don’t let the so-called “respectable” people slow you down!

Keep doing what you have been doing!

I say, again, *keep doing* what you have been doing all this time!

Stay with us who are trying hard to live—even if we are dying!

Stay with us who are trying to stay clean and sober!

I love you all. I thank God for you all. I pray for you all.

Thanks from lots of us. I’ll *continue* to pray for you.

ENOUGH

[from Anglo-Saxon *geneah*, it suffices]

Thanksgiving brings to my mind the whole subject of “enough.”

The problem in life, it seems, is what “it” is...and then, of course, what *quantity* of it “suffices.”

Over time, the original term and the later English word took on another meaning, pretty much at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, as in “*Enough!*” So at one moment we may say that we have enough (thank you, God, very much), but that may lead us, even moments later, to exclaim that enough’s enough (thank-you-very-much)! Every day of my life, I hear myself and/or others say, usually within hours, both of these extremes: “If only I had enough,” and then, “Man, I’ve had *enough!*” But in neither case or situation do I take a good, hard look at “what suffices” for my physical-emotional-spiritual well-being...what really is enough...before demanding more or demanding less.

That two-edged sword of enough—the demands we make on either edge—might just be the razor that’s cutting so much of our society (church-government-communities) to shreds; it might be the destructive Excalibur that’s rendering our personal lives (home-mates-vocations) to pieces of fodder.

I would suggest—with apologies to W.H. Auden—that we live not in the “age of anxiety,” but rather in an age of undefined-sufficiency; instead of the political catch phrase of “family values” endorsed by all political wannabes (especially “Christian” political wannabes) these days, I would suggest we employ the concept and the language of determining what *is* enough: personally, spiritually, communally, politically.

So often in our Sharing Groups, I hear myself or others dealing with this underlying issue—often dressed up in other costumes of life’s situations—without a single voice inquiring as to what the speaker really needs for *enough*. Sometimes, when we’re truly brave or honest, the costume comes off...we ask ourselves, in stark nakedness, what exactly would give us a sense of sufficiency, of enough, of adequate satisfaction. But how rare it is for us to ask that question at home, of a mate...or at work...or at the mall.

How often we experience that ambiguity of sufficiency in recovery: “No, Steps 1,2,3 aren’t enough”; “No, some stability in my sobriety is not enough”; “No, a month without an entangling relationship is not good enough.” We know it only too well in our private lives: “No, this year-old car is no longer enough”; “No, my spouse isn’t doing enough”; “That’s it: enough’s *enough!*” We harbor it in our anger of social strata: “*They* have enough”; “We don’t have enough”; “*They* have *more* than enough.” But we never seem to sit down together in our work, our homes, our institutions to determine what is enough for anybody.

We are conveniently confused (confusion, of course, allows denial) by all of the messages coming at us from every direction, all of it allowing us to put off the time we might actually sit together and determine our life-sufficiency. The messages are in our advertisements (“professional lying” as someone has called it), those sound-bite morsels which convince us that any “enough” we have is no longer enough. If we think we have enough, think of how more enough we can have with that extra line-of-credit (call now: 1-800-NOT-ENOUGH). If I don’t have enough of my enough, perhaps I can get it from those who I know don’t have enough already. But what about “free markets” and “global

internetting” and “gross national products”: by God, if I decided what was really enough, I might upset the whole damned appplecart...and then what would be enough!

We’ve heard recently that the 385 billionaires on earth control the same amount of wealth as 2,400,000,000 other people who inhabit this planet. I have never ever heard any one of those billionaires asked what they considered to be enough in their lives. Wouldn’t that be helpful and educational for them and the rest of us, to hear that response? And then ask one of those 2.4 billion other folks for their response. Wouldn’t those responses give us a start on charting the compass points of what is enough?

Or start asking the question of enough within the cult of celebrity. What does Michael Jordan think is enough? Or the latest Number-One-Draft-Pick? Or the club owners? Or Oprah? Or Billy Graham? Or the Enron executives? Not asking them to pontificate as to what’s enough for us, but to say honestly what is enough for *them* as individuals.

What’s our mate think is enough? Or our best friend? Or our pastor? Or our hairdresser? Or our garbage man?

Has anyone—in the past year or five years—seriously asked you what is enough in your own life?

It is, I believe, the best-kept secret—and the deepest-shadow secret—in our personal and public lives. I hear folks asked their religious beliefs, their economic theories, their political attitudes, their moral precepts...but I never hear anyone asked to define what is enough.

Maybe it’s un-American question.

But it sure is one heck of a great spiritual question. Perhaps even a Christian question...but, then, who’d dare ask it from the pulpit?

I think back to the stories I heard as a child of the “original” Thanksgiving, of Pilgrims and Indians somehow finding each other in the wilderness, exchanging pleasantries, and then deciding to share a terrific meal together. In all the pictures I colored in grade school related to that supposed event, there were smiles and dish-passing and peace-pipes aplenty, together with a sense of common humanity. Those were the same pictures that are colored today by our own children, brightly crayoned to hang tenderly and proudly on refrigerator doors for the upcoming feast. Yet, as history tells us, it’s unlikely that any of those Native Americans or those righteous Pilgrims ever looked each other in the eye during that robust occasion and asked, “So...given our future on this continent, what’s enough for you?” I wonder if anyone will ask me—amidst turkey, sweet potatoes, and football—if I’ve determined (and given thanks for) my own enough.

So we continue to struggle with “enough,” daily.

For all of us—whatever our struggle, whatever our expectations, whatever our hopes—I have written...and placed on the dining room wall of St. Dismas House...a possibility of what might be enough in our own Community:

If a fine, safe, and secure place to live isn’t enough
and
if good, wholesome food isn’t enough
and
if Companions who care about you isn’t enough
and
if honest, supportive work isn’t enough

and
if a life-saving, life-giving Program isn't enough
and
if spiritual growth isn't enough
and
if a community of healing isn't enough
and
if the gift of sobriety isn't enough
and
if learning positive adult living skills isn't enough
and
if learning to parent ourselves and children isn't enough
and
if all of that combined into a New Life isn't enough...
then what will ever, *ever* be enough?

ENGAGE

[from Old French *engagier*, to pledge something]

Standing secretly behind a doorway in the hallway off the living room of St. Dismas House—moments before Sharing Group was supposed to start—I grabbed a friend, handed him a camera, and asked him to take a good picture “when it’s time.”

“How will I know ‘when it’s time’?” he rightly asked. “What’s going on here?”

Somewhat frantic, I responded, “Believe me, you’ll know when it’s time!”

“For what?”

“You’ll see....”

With that, I disappeared from everyone’s sight, gathered my “props” and myself together, and entered the living room. As folks settled themselves into chairs and sofas for the beginning of *Havurah*, I summoned my courage, attempted to let go of control and inhibitions, crossed the room, knelt down in front of Sr. Maria, presented the bouquet from behind my back, and said the words, “Would you consider marrying me?”

Two seconds of stunned silence filled the room—apparently as Companions tried to truly believe that this was “Fr. Tom” down on one knee proposing marriage...as *I* tried to fully comprehend that I was down on one knee proposing marriage...and then an *explosion* of cheers, laughter, oh-my-Gods, and assorted rebel yells. Yes, it was true.

Sr. Maria—Patricia—answered back, with a face as bright as I’ve ever seen it, “*YES!*” And then the yelling and hollering started all over again.

Red-faced, I told her—in front of my Companions!—that I loved her. And I was glad...glad over the acceptance of this wondrous woman, glad over the embarrassment of being serious-silly in front of my friends, glad that our Community could share this moment with us, glad of the flashing camera, glad that I could let go of my fears of remarriage, glad that I could—especially publicly—allow myself this gift that I wanted more than anything.

Our relationship is *passionate*—in every possible connotation of that word which means “to suffer” in Latin; we exist, passionately, together—whether in argument or agreement, grieving or celebrating, planning or performing, crying or laughing.

Knowing, though, that she offers her whole heart and soul to each and all of us, it seemed appropriate to be kneeling, with flowers and love, before her.

CLEAN

[from Old English *claene*, remove impurities]

I had known them, my two friends, for a few years.

I *seemed* to know him better than her, but perhaps that was a common illusion stemming from more hours of conversation with him. Many times, either with him or her or together, our conversations had been pretty intense; while we often laughed at the peculiarities of life in casual banter over coffee, most of the time we were discussing (and feeling) “weighty” issues of relationships, kids, politics, marriage, age, and so forth. On many of those occasions, I was gifted with glimpses into their own relationship, but I knew that I really had little of the knowledge any outsider can have of the forty years a couple shares a life.

I liked them both very much, each for their particular ways of looking at life. And I liked the way they seemed to exchange roles of “masculine” and “feminine” in their one life/two lives: on one occasion, he would be glib and intellectual, while she would be gentle and heartfelt; on the next occasion, they would exchange these characteristics; on still another occasion, they would seem to unify one way or the other.

While I was not always comfortable in their combined presence—thank God I wasn’t always comfortable in realizing they were devoted/contentious—I realized over time that I not only liked them a lot...I loved them individually and together. Yes, I thought many times, I do love these people...I love them as one and as two. I guess I knew I loved them because when I thought of them, when I thought of being with them in their home, a smile would cross my heart and soul.

It was Christmastime. I had moved away to a distant place, being with different/similar folks with similar/different struggles. Although there had been a few phone calls and notes sent back and forth, it had been too long since being actively in their lives; I missed them, as well as others I knew, and so I decided to make a sort of holyday pilgrimage back to that previous place...and what felt like a previous life, struggling as I was with a clearer understanding of what my life might/should be. Passing through hundreds of miles in my beat-up car—wondering if God really listened to prayers petitioning for healthy vehicles—I thought of so many folks and relished fantasies of what our reunions might bring in the cheer of Christmastide.

Soon after my arrival, I was lambasted with the news that she was dead. Little warning for her or him—or for any of the rest of us who loved them—but a few days in the hospital for what was meant as a quick check on a short-term complaint; but, yes, she was dead.

Even more quickly, it seemed, I found myself sitting in an immense church with an immense crowd hearing immense testimony to her life. Way in the back, I was...way in the back because of so many other folks; feeling, too (Oh God, selfishly, I know) that I wanted to be up front...I wanted to be saying some of the words, to verbally draw pictures of her intensity and gentleness, to say some words into the eyes of this sudden widower/griever friend of mine, only that he might know the love I felt for him and her. But I knew that everyone in that gothic place dreamed similar hopes, and so I listened/dreamed in that cold, back pew. I was astonished how few of the mourners I knew—one of her/their gifts was to have friends in so many areas of life—and after a few smiles of non-recognition, I sulked off into a Christmastide gone awry and gloomy. No

thank you, I thought angrily, you can keep your carols of joy and good news.

I wasn't sure about the next day. Should I leave him alone—let him be with his kids and other friends—or should I stop by, if nothing else but to tell him again that I loved him. I decided to opt for the latter—hesitatingly—but was surprised to find no flurry of activity or crowds of cars at his house. Perhaps he was gone somewhere. But I knocked on the door, and he answered with that smile of his, explained that he had asked others for some quiet time, but wanted me to come eat some soup and bread with him. And so we sat in the small dining room that the two of them had renovated—along with the rest of the house—not too long ago. There was comfortable silence between mutual comments on the funeral, the sermon, the crowd, her life, our past relationship. The soup and bread were homemade, and the conversation felt that way, too.

After a brief silence, he began talking of the time in the hospital last week: how everything had happened so fast...of the chaos of hospitals during Christmastime...of the images of them being together in that place, almost as if none of it was really happening...of how they looked at each other as if this emergency would be quickly over, that a doctor would rush in and say that there had been some unexplained error and that she would be fine by tomorrow. And then he spoke of their last times together.

“I suspect,” my friend said, “that every couple on earth has their ‘private place’ in their relationship. I guess they do; I know we did. You know, that one place in life that is not shared, but accepted—without words or outward acknowledgement—as private....” He smiled and looked at me to see if any of that sounded familiar. I nodded.

“For us, it was the bathroom. It seems pretty strange and weird right now to say it, but in all those four decades or so together...and without ever having a word of discussion about it, or even wondering why we didn't discuss it or signify it...we always just let the other one use the john undisturbed and unobserved.” We smiled at each other as he continued amid short silences.

“I always thought that it was something important to her, so I honored that...and I guess she thought that she should do the same with me. It seemed that every other aspect of our life was wide open...expect for this thing about using the john alone.

“Things changed in the hospital, though...and, by God, I think it was the exclamation point to all that we had together. You see, the first day in the hospital was so crazy with tests and so forth...I mean, the nurses were there all the time, doing this, doing that, meeting every need she had. But the second day the staff was a bit busier, so when she needed the bedpan, I'd simply hand it to her, and then discreetly leave the room for a few minutes, and go to the nursing station to tell them that she needed some help. On the third day, she was getting weaker and weaker—and the nurses were somewhat short-staffed because of the holidays—and there wasn't time to call anyone, so I'd try to lift her up...and put the pan underneath her...and hold her body erect while she went...and then go out to find help. And then the last day—God, she was so weak—and I knew suddenly that she needed that bedpan...and there was no one to help...and we looked at each other...and, I mean, there was no need for any more privacy or distance or words or explanations...but only that vulnerability, that total acceptance that we had both probably never even thought of in all those years together...maybe something we had always secretly dreamed of...but *this* was the moment of that dream and that hope...and I put her on that bedpan...and I held her body up...and I stayed with her while she went...and, by God, I wiped and cleaned her when she was done...and I lowered her back down into her

bed...and I held her close to my face....”

He stopped talking, and we cried together—in sadness and great joy—and we cried together for a long time as our hands came together around that table of homemade life.

“It was,” he said finally, “the greatest gift I could have ever been given...cleaning her body one first and last time...and I miss her so much....”

Later on, we hugged and said our good-byes, and I left to return to my life far away. In the endless hours of car-time, I turned the two of them—their life and their final scene together—over in my mind and heart a hundred times...and I knew—if I needed any clarity—that I had been in the presence of the Christ during this homemade Christmastide. And then, as the New Year began to pass by increasingly, I sang carols in rhythm with the pavement—carols that I had ignored the week before—like a kid who just received the unexpected gift. I sang of her and I sang of him...and I cried some more in both sadness and joy.

WOUND

[from Old English *wund*, injury]

A few months ago, I received a mailing from one of my classmates from the prep school I attended; it was, of course, a fund-raising letter, but I always welcomed the included bits and pieces about various classmates I had known and cared about, including the author, who now told of her husband's early retirement, their travels around the country, their recent scuba trip to the coral reef in the Gulf of Mexico, etc. At the end of that letter, though, she offered these concluding thoughts:

“Don't you wish you had given more to [our school] so you wouldn't have to give Uncle Sam so much? At [our alma mater] you know your [contribution] is spent in a worthwhile manner. With the government, who knows. Just last week, a young mother ahead of me in the grocery store used food stamps to buy a gallon of Hagen Daz ice cream, two liters of cola, and four cans of prepared cake frosting. Egads, don't get me started....”

Well, it got “*me* started.”

I decided that I wanted to respond to my former classmate, and, since I have heard such comments for most of my life from various acquaintances, politicians, and fellow Christians, I wrote back:

“As always, you have my great thanks for the time and energy you offer to keep us all up to date on various classmates. I must admit, though, that I was disturbed by some of your words at the end...the words referring to the ‘young mother’ who chose to use some food stamps to buy some items of which you apparently disapproved. As I sat and read those words, a few questions immediately came to my mind: Is it possible that she was buying those items to provide a birthday party for one of her kids, a kid who might not get anything else in that celebration except for some ice cream, cola, and cake? Is it possible that she has an elderly parent living with her (as so many of the poor do), and that she was planning something special for that person? Is it possible that she was working a minimum-wage job (without benefits), while trying to support her kids, and she decided that she needed something a little special to keep her sanity and her morale? Is it possible that she had recently realized the immense handouts that we middle-class folks receive from the government in terms of tax-deductions for mortgage interest and property taxes and medical expenses (and special deductions for clergy and military personnel!)—and then thought, ‘Oh what the hell...I guess we deserve some ice cream and cake’? Is it possible that she recognized that she will never have much of anything more than she has now, regardless of how many hours a week she works or doesn't work, and that regardless of her efforts, her own sense of hope and relaxation—her own ‘trip to the Gulf of Mexico’—will only ever be found in some ice cream and cola? Is it possible that she just doesn't care any more whether or not we middle-class folks take her moral inventory or her food inventory while she's doing the best she can?”

“Well, who knows the answers to any of these questions? I certainly don't. But, as I live with ‘those’ folks and hear their stories and know their pain, I become increasingly convinced that the questions are at least worth asking. And given the choice which you offered, I guess I'll let my few dollars remain with Uncle Sam, to offer food stamps to the poor, whether or not I believe they ‘deserve’ it.

“Next Sunday, when our community again gathers to say the Eucharist, we will

pray for the continued health and prosperity of your clan, even as we will offer prayers of hope for all the young mothers who live on food stamps.

“Namaste.”

I mailed it off, glad that I said what I wanted to say, self-assured that it might be thrown in the waste basket as an irritating response from a classmate who had gotten weird during all those years since graduation.

But my certain smugness was tested by the arrival recently of the newest class letter: she had reprinted my response in its entirety, opening herself to this now-public “reprimand.” Wow. I wondered if I would have done the same...or if I would have secretly thrown the response in the trash with disdain.

Damn, now I had to look at my own suggestion: now I had to consider *her*, instead of only the food-stamp-wielding mother in the grocery store! Now I had to consider what wounds or struggles my former-classmate was carrying—what about that mother had triggered something in her besides government handouts—what mercy I was willing to offer *her*, as well as the young mother. I struggle. If nothing else, I was reminded that we all carry wounds, whatever our place or time. And now it was time to look at my *own*...as I offer prayers of gratitude for *both* the young mother *and* my classmate.

COURAGE

[from Latin *cor*, heart]

I don't think our Companion knew it was a courageous act. I don't think she knew in those moments that it was a heart-act...although I knew—we *all* knew—that her heart was breaking from this courageous act.

I suppose that most of us, on first hearing of it, might think it was the opposite. Perhaps we would grab the words/feelings of “irresponsible” or “cowardly” or some other definition that would render her and her decision one-dimensional and sterile and disposable.

Perhaps we would want the entire drama enacted amid daytime-TV shows in which the emcee and/or audience could boo and razz and insult her with impunity...or perhaps imagine her in the thumbs-up-thumbs-down judgment of the Coliseum...or place her vulnerable to an internet Netscape poll, with each of us pointing-and-clicking toward guilt or innocence. But, surely, she was already doing all of that to herself, unaided.

Living rooms weren't meant for legal proceedings, but that was the venue for this Family Court episode, as Court Clerk and Court Advocate sat with the three of us—Sr. Maria, our Companion, and me—amid coffee tables, plants, and pretty, framed pictures. Our Companion was visibly shaking in anxiety, the despair and heart-work palpable; she looked down at the carpet during the preliminaries, only occasionally glancing at a face here, a face there...seeking, I believe, some sense of affirmation from *someone* that this life-changing decision was righteous. I know that she must have seen it in Sr. Maria's moist eyes; I prayed that she found it in mine.

After years and years of struggle with alcohol and drugs, struggle with childhood demons and damaging forays—some of which we had witnessed, most of which we knew only through testimony and records—she had to face, through months of inner examination and cross-examination, whether or not she could provide a stable, financially-secure, emotionally-adequate environment for these three small children...these towheaded kids whom she loved more than life itself. In the adversarial machinations of her own heart and soul—in the depth of decision-making that we can only slightly imagine—she had concluded that she owed these kids an immense witness to ultimate maternal responsibility...yes, she would allow them to be legally adopted by a young, childless couple...she would let them go to these two kind, parents-to-be. But, no, she wouldn't let them go from her heart.

Bam. The Court Clerk stamped the official declaration for each child.

Bam. With each blow to the coffee table, we winced in unison...we winced in solidarity. Tears, from our eyes and from our love for our Companion, flowed with each declaration.

Bam. Thoughts flooded our minds for ways to comfort her, confirm her, thank her...to somehow say with reddened eyes or clasping hands that *Yes, dear heart, this is an act of courageous love!*

But there are no words, no eyes, no hands that adequately comfort in this residential courtroom...there is only the commitment to be with her in grief and healing, still knowing that it will take forever.

The Clerk and the Advocate offer kind words—good God, they must constantly witness legalities of the heart that are breathtaking—and they move through the door with

faked-ease. And so we are alone—the three of us—to sit together, to be silent, to commiserate rather than shame, to face passion rather than denial.

Silent prayers: God, help her see all that she offered these beloved children, both before and during this day. God, open our hearts continuously to her struggle and her courage. God, allow us to be in her life for a very long time, to affirm her in this pilgrimage throughout our days together. God, thank you for this witness, that we may find such courage in the ego-battles of our *own* souls.

VISION

[from Latin *videre*, to see]

[There I was, suddenly, in this gothic cathedral, standing in an overly-decorated sandstone pulpit, facing hundreds of people; I knew that every eye was watching, every ear waiting; I knew not what I was supposed to offer, but somehow I knew what I was going to say...and I began]

Namaste, brothers and sisters.

It is good to gather with you once again, to bring our hopes and visions face-to-face in the annual convention of this great diocese of Christ's church...or should we say: this hopeful manifestation of Christ's presence and ministry among the six billion children of God on the small planet we call Earth.

As you know, I am called upon by canon law to give an address on this occasion. I am called to speak to you about us, to reflect on scripture as I attempt to ascertain with and for you where we are—and where we might be headed as the Body of Christ.

Before I embark on such a demanding journey, though, I wish to remind you and myself of two things: first, that while I am considered your “superior” in the polity of this ancient institution, I consider myself your equal—or vice-versa—in all matters of spirituality and ministry. In other words, if you carry the ministry of layperson in the church, then realize that I am simply another layperson, inspirited, like you, as a minister of Christ's family; if you are designated a deacon or priest, then know that I am truthfully no more than either of those formalized ministries.

Secondly, let me assure you that before I end this brief offering, some of the ways that we define ourselves and some of the ways we operate will be altered...and those ways will likely have a pronounced effect on our life together. Some of you will be surprised or frightened by my suggestions, while others will feel affirmed in the Way of the Cross. Yet, as each and all of us certainly fit the profile of the Rich Young Man, perhaps we will discover together that parts of our future journey will be more responsive to the message of the Anointed One.

The text for this particular occasion is that poignant, pithy, absolutely astounding little sentence from the oral tradition of Micah: “This is what Yahweh asks of you, only this: to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.” It does astound, doesn't it? After the hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of books and manuscripts and sermons and hymns which have been offered for our edification over these two millennia, we are struck, aren't we, by the utter brevity and truth which lie at the heart and soul of this wisdom. It reminds us of that same simplicity of life and living which emanated from the soul and lips of Joshua—“Jesus”—of Nazareth as he struggled from audience to audience on his risky trek: “On two things—and only these two—depend everyone and everything: that we are called to love Yahweh with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength, and, identically, we are called to love our sisters and brothers as ourselves.”

As you sit here listening to me say these words, you know in your very innards and bowels that they ring true, don't you! As you review the journeys of your own lives—the demands and the joys and the despair and the jubilation—you know that the old prophet and the new prophet were saying the almost-indescribable: what it means to be fully human, fully connected with the Ultimate, fully animated to the Christ within

your own brain-body-blood-bone. Yes, we can say with one voice and one spirit: everything beyond this—everything I might think or write or speak or teach or preach—is fluff, is wordiness, is desperate exposition!

And so what? Are Micah's and Jesus' universal, eternal exhortations worth anything in the "real" world? Do they really matter a whit? Is there any sort of realistic link between the essence of absolute wisdom and the manner and ways we minister in the Name of Yahweh who offered the wisdom?

My own answer is this: I find in my heart increasingly that the epiphanies of the soul are not related to possible fruition in the acts of the apostles here congregated—including myself—and I am determined, within whatever years are left to me in this office, to act as shepherd not only within the dictates of spiritual formation, but, too, in the larger life that we call the Body of Christ.

I am not here to criticize the work that all of us have sought to fulfill, for certainly we have given much time and energy to the basics of our ministry: of marrying and burying, of teaching and preaching, of visiting and healing. Rather, I am offering a focus on where and how and with whom we practice those acts of apostleship...and how we might listen more closely to the Mentor who offered us the very basic lessons on how to live in community—joyfully and honestly—as the Body of Christ.

It is my estimation that Jesus sought to be with the least of the least...and it is my estimation that his model was meant to be both spiritual and practical. While I understand the nuances of scriptural interpretation and pastoral theology to the best of my abilities—that is, that even the rich and powerful can experience dark nights of the soul, and so "deserve" the ministry of Christ's servants—yet I, and we, cannot evade with any integrity of heart and soul the very real "Christ-ian" obligation to be with and learn from the poor, the outcast.

"Learn from the poor and outcast." That idea seems so foreign, naive, and anachronistic in our sophisticated day and ministry, doesn't it? What, on earth, do we have to learn from the poor and outcast? Well, according to the wisdom cited in our text, and according to the wisdom offered in the Sermon on the Mount, apparently there is *everything* to learn about the Kingdom of God! If we will only live it. If only we will alter our self-important structures, our ways of living, to become "these little children" of God. He seemed to be saying (and living) to us: if you will be with the least, then perhaps you will receive the keys, the Way, the Life. We are so used to giving, controlling, determining...and all of it seems to prevent us from receiving.

We cannot, of course, establish the Kingdom of Heaven by fiat or decree. We can only look to the Christ in each other to find some hints of direction and courage and resolve. Consequently, I am offering my own possibilities, both for myself and for the direction of this small corner of Christendom in the near future, and I shall pray for your dialogue, trust, and co-leadership. Be aware, however, that within the dialogue and struggle and resolution of what I have to suggest here and now, I am determined to live this out, both personally and officially, regardless of the practical consequences to my life and ministry.

Tomorrow, I will meet with the Chancellor, the Executive Committee, and the Standing committee of this Body to begin implementing the following:

1.) That all clergy salaries, including mine, be pooled and allocated so that each clergyperson will be paid the same base salary—regardless of title or position—and that

all added job expenses and entitlements be equally distributed, so as to officially and personally call us to the integrity of the first apostles and ministers.

2.) Given that the equitable distribution of assets will bring viable living expenses to all clergy, I will suggest and specify that all clergy hereby desist from claiming a tax-deductible “housing allowance,” for such public benefactions deny the needs of the poor, our brothers and sisters.

3.) I will direct the Treasurer of this Body to review the assets of the diocese, including the endowments of individual parishes, to eliminate and change any holdings of stocks which fuel the war machine, either in our own society or in the sale of war machinery to other nations.

4.) I am directing each and every parish, including the cathedral, to review its income and expenses so that, within five years, each parish budget will allocate at least fifty percent of its budget and endowments to practical ministry with the poor, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.

5.) In the future selection of candidates for ministry or position within this Body, there will be no discrimination regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, age, economic circumstance, or other artificial impediment—so that those who wish to live the Gospel message in solidarity with the poor, the outcast, and the marginalized may do so with the blessings of this Body.

6.) As clergy enter this diocese, and as clergy change jobs within this diocese, it will be the intent of each parish and clergyperson to find housing within one mile of the focus of the ministry of that clergyperson.

7.) Any “Christian” school formed or operated within a parish or with the oversight of this Body will adapt its structure and finances within the next five years so as to include at least fifty percent of its student body with those of all races and gender who have no funds for private education; and further, each parish or entity with such a school shall designate at least four members of the parish to attend the local *public* school board meetings and PTA each month.

8.) All groups officially affiliated with this Body—including such groups as Cursillo and men’s/women’s groups—will dedicate at least half of all activities (actual and financial) to work with the poor, so that spiritual formation and social interaction may be developed while painting, teaching, building, day-caring, feeding, renovating, and otherwise “doing while being.”

9.) We shall immediately begin the planning process for establishing a local School of Kindom Ministry for the development and blessing of clergy and laypersons within this Body, and I expect that this training program will be in operation within one year from today. This facility will be housed in an inexpensive yet adequate building (such as a presently-vacant warehouse) in the downtown area, and will be renovated by the work of our own hands, however possible. Teachers/mentors will be not only those credentialed in our own faith, but also wise people from other traditions and religions; students will dialogue with these teachers/mentors in morning (or evening) sessions, while afternoons are filled with learning activities among the poor and outcast. Of such will we all receive a better understanding of our ethics, our faith, our theology, and our pastoral calling.

10.) Before any new buildings are approved for new parishes within this Body, a thorough study will be conducted to see if the new parish might share facilities with other

groups, denominations, or faith-centers in existing structures.

11.) Each parish will be asked to adapt its budget so that at least five dollars per parishioner will be donated to the local property tax office each year, as an affirmation of our responsibility to the local civic and educational community.

12.) Each minister-in-charge of a parish in this Body will formulate the parish preaching schedule so that a layperson will offer the sermon at the main liturgy at least once each month (with the minister-in-charge in attendance), with no specific layperson preaching more than once a year; the focus of these sermons will be the practical and spiritual journey which the layperson has experienced—or wishes to experience—in the context of the Gospel.

13.) I will suggest that the present diocesan offices—which demand huge financial outlays because of prestigious location and ostentatious furnishings—be offered as a daycare center to a local, established entity, and that the present offices be moved to sufficient space within the new School of Kindom Ministry building mentioned previously.

In summary, then, let me say that I believe we have taken on the trappings of the very temple of power that Jesus cleansed in his sorrow and rage. We are bogged down with the ecclesiastical baggage which has piled up on our caravan of faith. We are sluggish and fat from a diet of superfluous, too-comfortable meals of indulgence and mock prosperity, instead of knowing the satisfaction of receiving the adequate fishes and loaves. We are reactively complacent as the privileged keepers of our vacuous vault, in a starving world on the verge of rebellion and despair.

In the face of these suggestions, we can—like the Rich Young Man—panic in the fear of the unknown and the undone. Or, we can forge true community, pool our resources, commitment, and faith...and get on with it as the exciting-joyful-wondrous-risky adventure of the Christ, as the reason for our servant leadership, as the means for learning what the real Kindom is all about. It is in such faithful solidarity with you that I commit myself and our common life in Christ this day and in the future of our Life together.

I know that each of us hears—deep within us—that sacred invitation.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

[The “amen” ricocheted off the towering walls, returning to hit me in the chest, above my heart...and I suddenly realized that there were only a few people still seated in the cathedral...and I yelled or screamed out, “What has happened...what has happened?” The remaining faces before me were smiling....

And that is the only dream—that I know of—I ever had of being a bishop.

LEARN

[from Old English *leornian*, comprehend]

I was about to officiate at the funeral for a five year-old boy.

He was a lovely kid, with that air of joy often seen in children who have experienced long-term illness; something—unknown I think to the rest of us—imbues them with both a thankfulness for every new day, as well as a mysterious wisdom about each new day. Somehow, even in their desperate suffering, these kids know what life is really about...and, more often than not, they minister to those “adults” around them. I also knew—from a week-long stay in a pediatric unit in my youth—that the veteran-kids, the ones who had really put in hard time in those hospitals, have a sense of camaraderie and empathy among themselves that no outsider can fathom, create, or dissipate.

I had known the boy—along with his parents, siblings, and grandparents—for a couple of years, mainly by being a close neighbor; I liked to sit in grandpa/grandma’s kitchen, drink thick coffee, share our common tobacco addiction, and hear stories and craziness from several generations. Such rituals had been formed among us—as I even got to hear all the gossip of this particular clan—and many of them loved to offer slightly off-color jokes to shock the priest. And we’d laugh uproariously over outrageous punch-lines, simply to be able to laugh; these folks were poor, and the laughter sometimes offset the struggles.

The kid was a hoot: blond hair, blue eyes (full of devilry), great smile. Sometimes, when he sat in my lap, I would tickle him to the point that his back would arch in utter euphoria...and he would gasp for breath until he let forth with a scream for mercy...and then beg for just a little more. As an extended family, a community, a tribe, or what-on-earth-we-were, we seemed to be pretty darn good at ignoring this infection that was cascading through and killing this exuberant focus of our attention.

The infection—amoral, apolitical, not defined by or interested in such things as theology or emotions or justice—multiplied with ferocity until the battle was over. Goliath had won this one. We spectators, always certain that David would sling out the antidote toward the terrible giant in the last moments, could only stare at each other after the damned phone call from the hospital.

So there I was, sitting near the child-sized casket, as a seemingly-endless line of mourners found their seats in this too-dark funeral parlor. I sat there looking at those generations of relatives, those teachers and young classmates, those folks from the community—scores and scores of them—who were as desperate as I to find some words of explanation or comfort or truth about the tragedy among us, having heard in the previous twenty-four hours just about every platitude we humans can muster to make-some-sense-of-all-this. Sitting there alone, knowing I was going to start speaking in about five more minutes—wondering again where on earth to find the intersection of truth and pastoral care—I became mesmerized (staring vacantly, I’m sure) with a long-ago memory of death and learning:

I was in a seminar room of the huge medical center, one of the many first-year clinical training students who surrounded the large Formica table; each of us had one year of seminary training beneath our halos, and there we were, feasting on theory after theory about what would somehow fashion us into professional, learned chaplains for the sick and dying. Our particular group had the great fortune to have a nationally-renowned

clinical supervisor—as well as a brilliant, if controversial, psychiatrist—as our mentors. We had been together for a few weeks of that long, hot summer, getting to know each other as best we could amidst the banter of God-talk, future-clergy-talk, and the testy edge of competing for mentor approval.

As one of the students read relentlessly from his notes on yesterday's patient visits, as we stifled yawns in our certainty that our pastoral techniques were likely superior to his, the classroom door swung open abruptly, as a nurse addressed our supervisor: "Reverend, there's an emergency call from Six-East nursing station...there's a 32 year-old man in the last stages of kidney failure, and his wife needs a chaplain as soon as possible." With that twinkle in his eye that always bespoke now-you're-*really*-going-to-see-what-life's-about, our supervisor looked around the table and said, "Okay, who wants to take this one?" None of us had experienced a death so far...and there was silence. He waited for that silence to become a part of our very bones and guts, and then added, "Okay, who's *willing* to go on this one?" If silence can become more silent, it did in that moment. He waited, as sweat began to form around the table. Exactly why, I'll never know, but my arm began to rise above the Formica, and before I could bring it back to my side, I heard, "Okay...good...Jackson...get at it."

This stranger looked like he had been a strong athlete in his life, but his body was yellow and in failure. He looked like someone I might like, if that makes any sense. His wife was pretty...and sweet...and kind. She asked me quickly to say a prayer, and I did, but I haven't any memory of it. The memory I do have is of a racing heartbeat, sweaty palms, an absolute void of this-is-what-happens-next. Suddenly, before I could utter anything more (thank God), his breaths became intermittent and very long...and one final exhalation brought the intern to pronounce death. I stood back from the bed, as his wife shouted the sobs of no-this-can't-happen.

Moments later, I was sitting with her alone in the lounge. She had murmured the universal question of WHY, and in my absolute discomfort, I had to fill the room with theological exposition, centuries-old religious platitudes, scriptural proof-texts, comforting Hallmark captions...anything, anything that might prevent her silence and pain and sobbing from confronting my soul. I so *much* wanted my words to wash away her—and my—pain.

I returned to the seminar room as another student was in mid-sentence, describing his own try at chaplaincy on the previous day, but as I entered those theoretical confines, he fell silent...and every eye was on me as I sat down. Clearly, everyone wanted to know how my new professionalism had worked. "Well, Tom, what did you learn?" the supervisor asked. I paused...I got about twenty words out of my mouth—starting to describe the scene and circumstances—and I suddenly inhaled deeply, as if kned in the groin...and I began to sob...uncontrollably. And I sobbed...and yelled out...unintelligible words. And pounded on the Formica surface as I cried and cried. I couldn't look at anyone—I think I thought that I had somehow failed in my role...and I had nothing to offer except my own pain, somehow linked to that wife's pain, inexplicably.

Our supervisor did not say a word for a *long* time; it seems that I cried for just a few minutes short of forever. And then, amid the obvious fact that other students had begun to cry too, he let a *longer* silence pass. And then, with that wry smile on his face, he said, "You all just learned just about everything there is to know." And he very quietly and slowly picked up his briefcase to leave the room. As he opened the door, he

looked back, nodded toward me, and said to everyone, “Chaplain him.” And as he exited, my fellow students surrounded me, in their own silence.

I stood up before the grieving pilgrims in that funeral home, and I looked at them all for several seconds, as they looked at me. Out of that silence came my first words, which I had not planned to say:

“I do not believe in a God that kills little boys. Or grown-ups. I do not believe in a God that ‘takes people away from us’ to test us or punish us or teach us. I do not believe in a God who ‘collects flowers for His garden’ or who ‘takes the best for His heavenly home’ or a God who offers ‘miracle cures’ for one child but not another. I don’t believe in a God who adds up ‘naughty and nice’ like some sort of celestial Santa, determining who gets the gift of life or the pain of death. I don’t believe in a God who hurls arbitrary or even pre-planned thunderbolts at the hearts of terrified children or parents. I don’t believe in a God who acts capriciously with the deepest, most abiding loves of our lives.

“I believe in a God who understands well His Creation. A God who knows that the intermingling of living organisms can lead to illness or death for one or the other. A God who lives within us, not only to become a healing part of our broken dreams, but a Presence in those around us, that we might offer that Presence to each other. A God who knows that you loved this little boy immeasurably...just as he loved you unconditionally. A God who knows that language is rarely helpful, that silence is medicinal, that touching and grieving are essential. A God who knows that this blond-haired, blue-eyed gift to us was a Teacher of lessons that we will never forget. A God who knows that by caring for each other, struggling together, crying and remembering and dancing with joy and then crying again together in community...well, if we’ll let that happen, then we will have learned from this little boy—this lovely, dancing, laughing, crying little boy—just about everything there is to know about everything.”

And I sat down.

From so long ago—and through the gifts of lives which come and lives which go—I know that on one day I will have the gift of tickling a child almost to craziness, on another day I will get the gift of sitting with cherished friends over coffee and smokes, and on another day I will beat the Formica table with such pain as to be incalculable...and if I’m really, really awake, I’ll know in all of it that others will surround me in laughter or tears, the Christ within them. And then I won’t need a bunch of silly words to help me heal.

REDEMPTION

[from Latin *redimere*, buy back]

Sometimes it's very painful.

Well, no, that's not really true; what's true is that it's *always* painful.

Sometimes it's redemptive. A new learning for someone; a change of course; a helpful resolution; a perception of reality-as-never-before-seen.

But, yeah, it's always a painful process: telling someone that they have to leave the Residential Community, that their behavior (usually related to drugs and alcohol) has broken the deal we made about living in common community, about commitment to the recovery process.

It's often a call in the middle of the night. Someone who has seemingly been doing well is suddenly drunk or drugged or has not returned to one of the Houses at night.

Immediately the gut tightens from an avalanche of feelings and thoughts: great affection for the person involved; a person who has become part of daily life and daily rituals; a person who has struggled through a lot of stuff over several months of meetings and groups and talks and sharing; a person who has turned some corners and adapted some behaviors; a person who has often been sweet and kind; *A person!*

As I grope through early-morning darkness, searching for clothes and shoes, trying to clear the middle-of-the-night dreams or cobwebs from my brain, seeking composure for the imminent chaos...in all of that, the thoughts and feelings continue to cascade. No, don't take this stuff personally; no, this person did not do this thing to me, but to themselves; no, anger won't be appropriate or helpful; no, this isn't a success-or-failure deal; no, don't seek logic or sense in any of it.

And then: how is this going to affect other Resident Companions, who are still struggling through their own stuff, their own demons, their own fantasies? And scarier still: how is this going to affect me with my own demons...tonight, tomorrow, next week? Is this going to cause me to question this work...or these other people I love? Am I going to start distancing myself from them, afraid that they, too, are going to somehow "hurt" me with future disappointments?

Get a grip, I tell myself.

As I lumber on through the maze of darkness, I sometimes remember sitting in my office years ago with a counseling client. It was our first session together, and as he told me the beginnings of his story and his concerns, he said, "I guess I've become very disillusioned..." It took a few moments for that to strike my brain, but then I blurted an exclamation—something like "HOORAY"—and added, "Are there some illusions about life that you really want to *keep*?" Yet even as the words left my mouth, I knew that there were illusions we all want to keep and treasure...even though they do us no good in dealing with the reality of everyday living. Illusions like "I'm in control of the universe" or "I can save myself and everyone else from pain" or "Gee, if there's an answer to this problem, then we'll all just do it!"

So there I am, often with one or two Companions helping me, as we proceed with the liturgy of "packing up." Item by item, we pack this person's belongings into beat-up luggage or—typically—into black plastic bags. Silence prevails. It is a terribly sad process. Everyone involved is thinking their own thoughts, reviewing their own relationship with this person, struggling and struggling with that same deluge of feelings.

We find ourselves, without saying so, in a middle-of-the-night silent prayer circle, as we separate shoes and shirts and underwear and toiletries, wondering individually where on earth these same items will be unpacked in the next hours, days, or weeks.

I begin to imagine the comments that will surface in various social circles over the next few days, comments that will be meant to heal or shame or support or harm this person...and me. As I pack another plastic bag with this person's trappings of hoped-for respectability, I can imagine the looks and comments they will receive (some from the mirror) as the world learns of their recent relapse from sobriety. I know that there will likely be thoughts of what-the-hell-why-even-try-anymore, or even thoughts of using more drugs or alcohol to simply end it all. And I remind myself that none of this is under my control, that this person must again work the Steps...or die. I know, too—as the bags pile up—that if this particular child of God is also carrying an HIV+ infection, then the odds are high that they will likely—without a program of recovery—die of their addiction rather than their infection.

A plastic bag getting too full, I pick it up, spin it around several times to create a handle, tie the knot, and place it next to the other containers of new-transience. My thoughts and emotions also spin around several times, as I seek my own handle to all of this: “What might I have done better for this person?” or “What might I have said clearer?” or “How could I have watched closer?” or “What didn't I pick up on sooner?” I know that all of those thoughts are convenient barriers to feeling my feelings of grief, but I think them anyway, then reminding myself to work my own program for co-dependency.

I and we walk away from the plastic pile—sometimes hugging each other quietly in mutual support and sadness, sometimes not even wanting to look each other in the eye, lest we betray our inner turmoil. I find myself wandering into the kitchen—too awake now—grabbing yesterday's pot of coffee, warming some of it in the microwave, tossing in some fake-cream, knowing how awful it's going to taste, but ready to pursue my own addictions. I light a smoke and sit down at the table...the very table where I sat yesterday sharing that same pot of fresh coffee with the person we have just packed up. A few of us commiserate for awhile, saying what we always say to each other...comforting, useless, wonderful, grieving, supportive banter of hopes gone awry.

I know that by mid-day—when the sun is out, when this darkness has lifted its oppression—there will be “reviews” throughout all sorts of different communities as to what happened tonight. Some will support our insistence on a clean-and-sober Community. Some will say, “So-and-so can re-apply here in thirty days!” Some will affirm the concept of “tough love.” Some will be angry that we didn't immediately offer this person “yet another chance.” Some will say that we don't know what the hell we're doing. Some will say we should be a lot tougher, acting as guards and wardens. Some will shake their heads and say, “Why the hell do they bother with these people!” Some will say, “Well if I ran that place...” Some, of course, simply won't care one way or the other. And some will sit with us in group, sharing their own demons, rather than taking an inventory of ours or of the person who has left us.

I go back to bed, too wired from coffee and adrenalin to sleep soon. The ceiling becomes my mental blackboard as I write notes to my soul. Erase one, write another. All of the notes are a preamble to what I hesitate to wonder: so what's the redemption in all of this? I try to set aside my ego and arrogance. Next to the spinning ceiling fan, I

engrave with my eyes:

“I am not the arbiter of redemption. Although I am allowed to see it and feel it on many occasions, I am not called to design it, define it, implant it, or expect it. There is no timetable or schedule for redemption. Someone may experience it today...or on their deathbed. It often comes in tiny steps, rather than flashes of complete change. It is never complete in any of us. It is the gift of life. It is the ultimate hope. No one else can do it for me; I can do it for no one else. I see breathtaking miracles and changes every single day of my life—when I allow myself to see—in these folks we call ‘addicts’ or ‘alcoholics’ or ‘poor’ or ‘infected.’ If that is not enough for me, then that is my demon. I will grieve the losses around me and within me, and I will celebrate the small steps on the journey. I am not the arbiter of redemption.”

I glance around the darkened room—as the caffeine and nicotine subside—
thanking God for the safety I am given, praying for some sort of safety for my friend who has gone back to the streets. “I am not the arbiter of redemption,” I repeat.

Without knowing exactly when or why, I sleep.

COVENANT

[from Old French *convenir*, agree]

Within my own soul, within the souls of so many folks I encounter in “Fifth Steps” or in Sharing Groups or in personal relationships—and perhaps within the universal soul—there is that burden of shame, of history, of “those things we have done that we should not have done.” And so we carry them around, not only in our secret black-plastic-bags of the soul, but, too, in our barricades of “protecting others from us”—of being so certain that our own “sins” (of which the most ancient definition is “to miss the mark”) are the *very worst* on earth...and, therefore, anyone who heard of them would certainly not want to ever associate with us again.

I carry them. You carry them. And, occasionally, we can almost hear the rustling of the black plastic, especially when we find ourselves deep in the joy of new relationships, new intimacy.

I had found myself gloriously pleased to have a new friend in the Community—and I knew that he was equally pleased—for we could talk and laugh and cry about life in all of its absurdities...and even though I knew that his life was severely limited in his terminal disease, I wanted to explore and expand this mutual intimacy of life experiences for as long as it was available to me and us.

One day, I received a call from him, and I could tell that his voice was nervous as he asked me to come over to his apartment for a talk about “something very important.” By the time I could get some free time, it was early evening, and the two of us sat in the living room of his comfortable apartment.

“I need to tell you some things about me” (long pause in his trembling voice), “things I should have told you months ago...things that will likely repulse you about my life and behavior...things that will certainly end our good friendship.”

I was so stunned, and yet curious—not imagining anything this gentle man could say that would affect me/us that completely, even as I *could* immediately imagine my own “sins” that would repulse him!

He continued, slowly and nervously, to tell me of his version of a descent into hell: embezzlement, discovery, legal proceedings, sentencing, jail time, rape in jail, HIV infection, family isolation...the litany went on for a very long time...and I simply listened. When he finished, he carefully looked up from his staring at the coffee table, drew a deep breath and added, “I will certainly understand if you wish to never associate with me again.”

Inexplicably, it seemed, I cried for a moment. My friend seemed surprised, and asked, with some obvious embarrassment, what was wrong.

“I’m feeling terribly sad for what you’ve gone through,” I said. “And it makes me realize not only how much I value our friendship, but how much I admire your courage in facing all of that...and how much closer I feel to you now.” There was a period of silence, as he slowly shook his head at the carpet, not quite understanding—nor perhaps believing—that his “confession” could lead to respect.

Moments later, I continued, “And, partly, I’m pissed. That you would not trust me to hear these things without rejecting you as my good friend,” even as I knew that my own fears of rejection would have led to the same conclusion.

We talked, for a long time—of the vagaries of life, of battles lost and won, of

unexpected acceptance in our lives—and that evening became the touchstone of our future time together as dear friends. Months later, when Companions and I sat with him in his last hours of life—and in the following days when we buried him—I knew that we had forged a covenant that can happen only when we “empty” ourselves, when we risk the expected finality of crucifixion, only to have the stone rolled away from our self-imposed tombs.

And now it is happening again, with another dear friend, a friend with whom I’ve traveled some war-torn roads in his journey in addiction and recovery and all the detours in between. In his utter fear of being rejected by a good woman who wishes to marry him, he has told me that he plans not to tell her of a major “history” in his life, a history—he believes—that would cause her to run in the opposite direction, horrified and disgusted. As he wishes to have me officiate at the Rite of Holy Matrimony in a few months, he is sharing his “deception” with me, knowing, I think, that I disagree. So we talk and argue and debate the pros-and-cons of all of it...seeming to have reached an impasse...and finally I write to him:

I've been "sitting" with this for a few days, letting it roll through my brain and gut...

Yes, of course, our "histories" are always a two-edge sword, depicting us "warts and all" to those with whom we risk intimacy and solidarity. I certainly understand (I think) your presently-valid feelings of risk...of the possibility of hurt and loss...of somehow "protecting" you and her from your past. I would likely have *all* of those same fears—and surely have in my own relationships...not wanting to divulge the very things that have made me "me," as a three-dimensional, rather than two-dimensional, person.

Given that, I wonder, anew, about the other "edge": what is the cost of "hiding" your past?

I believe that it's about the *burden* that is then carried, a burden known to you and your past associates/friends/enemies, a burden that may become increasingly heavy in the fear of carrying it. It becomes not only *your* burden, then, but one you indirectly ask *everyone else* to carry—not simply the burden of secrecy, but, too, the burden of "guarding" the secret, of "accidentally mentioning something that will supposedly devastate his relationship with her."

Good grief, how does *anyone* (who loves and cares about you) possibly forge any kind of loving, intimate relationship with this woman that you love—of sharing stories, memories, laughs, tears—while trying to weigh every word or reference, while implying, indirectly, to her, "Well, the very things that I appreciate and love and share about him can't be casually referred to—because you, dear woman, don't have the strength of character and understanding to handle reality"? In other words, you ask everyone, I suppose, to come to know and love her—just as you love her—yet that journey toward intimacy must necessarily proceed on the thinnest of ice...hesitancy with each step and word, lest the cracks open into a cold drowning of guilt and loss!

Honestly, my dear friend, that's my *only* concern about this whole matter.

I'm not trying to state some esoteric, intellectual stance of moral purity or ethical correctness; rather, I'm suggesting—after almost forty years of such struggles with folks (and *myself*)—that *reality* will somehow raise its demanding head (probably sooner than later), thereby adding *another* burden ("Why couldn't you trust me in my love for you?") to the already immense burden being carried. It's the ol' "elephant in the living room"—it's going to be noticed some time by someone, like it or not. And you *know* that.

No, it's not a matter of me—or anyone you know—"leaving this matter closed," because the "matte"—your life and meaning—can never be closed, even if you die!

And no, it's also not a matter of me being willing to "consider performing the ceremony." Of course, I'd love to be involved in the sacred intimacy of that, to be witness to the *covenant*—not the "ceremony"—that is effected...and in that covenant are the beautiful, wondrous words of the holy vow, "And with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you." That is the sentence that always brings a lump to my throat and tears to my eyes and strength to my heart, for I know the sheer heroism that it takes to offer that depth of risk to the beloved. That is the moment when we *all* know whether the covenant is being forged in the sacred...or the profane. And as a witness, do I honor the two of you in that moment (as the rite *demand*s of witnesses) if I believe the covenant is shrouded in secrecy or mendacity?

"And with all that I am,"—completely, perfectly, and imperfectly *you*—"and all that I have,"—my character, my history, my blemishes, my gifts, my love, my battered possessions—"I honor you." I honor you because it's so damned scary to do so. Wow. Now *that's* a covenant!

I hope you realize that this dialogue (on my part—and, I'm sure, on yours), this struggle for mutual understanding and declaration, comes out of love and respect, in the deepest meaning of those words. All of this has caused me to look again at my own covenants—my own heroism of personal disclosure...or lack thereof—and so the dialogue becomes another gift of Grace between us. I thank you for that—and for you—regardless of what happens between now and that day of solemn, joyful covenant.

He told her his "history." She cried, reflecting further upon her own. No one ran away, repulsed.

But sometimes folks do run away when they find we're not a marble idol, but a human pilgrim...and I've run from folks in my past, not realizing that their "sins" reminded me a bit too much of my own.

And there's a lesson in all of that, too.

WED

[from Old English *weddian*, to unite closely]

On this August 2nd, in the large Pollard United Methodist Church—a place “borrowed” and made sacred for us previously for Companion funerals, for World AIDS Day services—hundreds of Companions gathered for the Rite of Holy Matrimony for Sr. Maria and me...and what an occasion it was!

The New Jerusalem Baptist Church choir set the place afire with voices of jubilation.

Three of our own, grown and mostly-grown children—Jenny, Peter, Patton—offered words of commitment and solidarity; the fourth, Lisa, brought her gorgeous voice to “Amazing Grace”—even as our sister, Barbara, offered her operatic voice to “The Lord’s Prayer.”

Gregory, in his inimitable R&B styling, played and sang a song of love and hope, “Please Send Me.”

The “flower girls” escorted Sr. Maria down the aisle in a parade of memories: daughters of both living and deceased AIDS Companions, daughters of addiction and recovery, daughters of our own hearts; one of the little ones—for whatever memory or feeling bloomed in her own heart—stopped abruptly during the procession and ran toward me, crying; I gathered her into my arms and held her, knowing that she had personified “an outward and visible sign of an inner and spiritual grace.”

The congregation exploded into joyous laughter and tears as folks recognized that the musical prelude to Maria’s entrance was a song from *The Sound of Music*: “What Do You Do with a Problem Named Maria?”...and then the beauty of her person walking through them—and through treasured memories—toward the altar.

A prayer was offered, “calling into the room”—as we say—all of those Companions throughout the earth and all of those who have died with us, each of them standing “between” those present, “the invisible body of Christ made visible.”

Sr. Jane brought us, movingly, the sacred reminders of the Beatitudes.

The clergy—Paul (Lutheran), Michael (Episcopal), Doris (Unity), Ron (Disciples of Christ)—brought us the right words of memory and joy, the sharing of the Eucharist, and, from our *Book of Prayers, Liturgies, and Learnings*, our blessing of each other:

Celebrant: O Holy One, lead us forth into the world in the peace and love of the Christ.

People: We go forth to live in that peace and love!

Celebrant: Lead us forth into the courage we see in blessed St. Martin of Georgia, in blessed St. Oscar Romero, in blessed St. Mohandas Gandhi, and in all the saints around us.

People: We go forth to live in courage and hope!

Celebrant: Lead us forth into the joy we see in blessed St. Francis and in blessed St. Clare and in all the saints around us.

People: We go forth to live in joy and celebration!

Celebrant: Lead us forth into the commitment and love we see in blessed St. Dorothy Day, blessed Mary the Magdalene, and in all their sisters of faith.

People: We go forth with commitment to live in love and hospitality!

Celebrant: Lead us forth into the Companionship we see in blessed St. Dismas, in

blessed St. Damien, and in all the saints around us.

People: We go forth to live in the gift and the strength of Companionship!

Celebrant: Let us go forth, then, knowing that the Grace of God will always beckon our return to sacred community.

People: We go forth and will return in the Grace of God!

Celebrant: Let us reach out to each other in all sorts of embarrassing and encompassing ways,

People: for it is only in reaching that we touch.

Celebrant: Bless especially this day Patricia and Thomas, that they may together grow in wisdom, strength, companionship, and joy;

People: in love, forgiveness, grace, and common cause.

Celebrant: May their love for each other overflow into our mutual community,

People: as we celebrate that we are members one of another;

Celebrant: For the Blessing of God our Creator, God the Universal Christ, and God the Spiritual Manifestation of Grace and Hope goes with us all, now and forever.

People: Thanks be to God!

Celebrant: The Meal is ended. Go in peace, seeking justice!

People: Amen! So be it! Amen!

Amid our 24/7-life of chaos and struggle, we dedicate a day to revelry, celebrating into the wee hours of the next morning—no drugs, no alcohol, no schedule—with karaoke songs and hugged reminders that everything we need this day is abundantly grace-full within us and around us.

Tomorrow is tomorrow. Today has been a glimpse of heaven.

MISSION

[from Latin *mittere*, send off]

Two long-ago conversations sprang into my mind in these past thirty days. The remembrance of them lockered in my brain only because they bespeak the heart and soul of what was to come.

It was almost five years ago that they took place. I was trying to make it very clear to the small number of Companions present when we started this specific ministry that we might be tempted sometime in the future to “sell” our work and efforts to some person or group who offered a bunch of money with strings attached. I cautioned myself and my co-volunteers to be vigilant to such seduction and persuasion, reminding ourselves of our intention toward simplicity. I hoped, I said, that we would always remain clear within ourselves of our vision and commitment.

The second conversation happened soon thereafter. I was discussing with a couple of dear friends some memories of power exerted in the Church, mental health, and other institutions; that is, I was suggesting that the more “public” we became in our work and ministry—if at all—the more likely that we would be criticized and scapegoated, that folks—even “supporters”—might come at us strongly with anger and threats, especially if we made decisions or determined guidelines with which they disagreed. Again, I hoped that such would not happen...but, I mentioned, we had better continually look to our solidarity for courage and resolve.

In the last month, both of those conversations have been animated in current life. I offer them not only to remind myself of lessons which need to be constantly re-learned in my own mind and psyche, but also as a reflection for others who may seek to carry the gospel into public life.

One of the joys I experience almost daily as Abbot of this Order is that of writing “thank you” notes to folks who freely and openly offer their lives to this ministry...be it funds, labor, morale, or all of the above. It is joyful in various ways: in constantly reminding me of how many Companions and co-ministers we have throughout this country; in reminding me of the trust that so many folks have in us in the written and unwritten affirmation that we’re trying to do the best we can in specific circumstances; in reminding me of how supportive people can be, especially when their own financial or physical resources are very limited. There isn’t a week goes by without a reminder that we are truly blessed by a spiritual family, both near and far. In other words, literally hundreds of people have given of themselves in one way or another, each and every one who understood in their gifts that our offerings—one to another—must remain freely given, to discern our ministry in the Presence of the Christ...again, as best we can.

It was with some sadness, then, that we were recently approached by an individual—ostensibly representing a “third-party”—who offered what seemed to us as a large amount of money, but apparently only if we would give a substantial part of the funds to yet another person. When I clearly, kindly (I hope), and specifically told the “middle person” that such use of charitable money was not only—in our opinion—illegal and immoral, but also violated the integrity of our Community, they suggested suddenly that it wasn’t “absolutely necessary” that we follow their demand—that, yes, they would go ahead and offer the donation (many thousand dollars) anyway; they knew that such an amount was *huge* in our small world. Of course, once we said no to the

“scheme,” the donation was never given to the Order.

There are times when we feel pretty desperate about meeting our financial obligations, and such were the circumstances when the “gift” was supposedly offered. We have known—and accepted—from day one that this ministry would proceed or end simply and obviously by the charitable hearts of the Companions involved—not by grants or institutional funds or seductive manipulations. But that part of us—inside our hearts and souls—that wants to forget the simplicity of things, that wants to momentarily forget the trust that’s been put in us, that wants to, even briefly, escape the demands of recurring bills...well, that part of us can quickly be tempted to offer ourselves “for sale,” regardless of our commitments. And that’s when we need to remember those long-ago conversations, to look into each other’s eyes for solidarity and integrity, to echo together (even fearfully) the founding premise: No, we’re not for sale. To answer in any other way—even as tempting as it sometimes seems—is an insult to each and every one who has put their trust in us. No, we’re not holier-than-thou...we *are* thou...as best we can.

Regarding the second of those long-ago discussions...well, sometimes “love,” “affection,” and “acceptance” can be used as the bartering stake in matters of persuasion or intimidation. We all know that, don’t we?

I was in the midst of a passionate discussion with a friend—I use the word “passionate” advisedly, for if it really does mean “suffering” (as the dictionary indicates), we were certainly doing that! Actually, maybe “compassionate” would be a better word (“to suffer *together*”), for we were passionately suffering over the same issue, the same situation, the same confusion, the same uncertainties...we were, though, reaching far different conclusions. And then—in the midst of this wonderful/awful ping-pong of point and counter-point—the question was lobbed in my direction with skill and certitude, with maddening calm and deft aplomb: “So what does the Mission Statement say?”

A great shot on their part, I thought, because the two of us had never really spoken in the language of organizational structure, Grant-Writing-English, brochures. I think they knew I hated such stuff (hence the great shot!), and I suspected that they hated such PR stuff, too.

My second thought, though, was: *Mission Statement? Mission Statement! What on earth...*

And so I began to tap dance verbally and pointedly. I mentioned (with a mental smirk) that I had recently written a Mission Statement about our work and ministry...that another friend in a large city was trying to convince some colleagues to donate some money to the Community, and he thought we might look a bit more “presentable” to his professional associates if he could hand them a Mission Statement. I knew he was right...and so I wrote it out, summoning as much professionalism as I could muster on short notice. “So there!” I thought, “We do have a concise, precise Mission Statement!”

But before I could proffer this intellectual masterpiece of non-profit expertise as some sort of coup de grace in this present, increasingly-passionate debate, I realized that I didn’t remember exactly what I had written nor what I had emphasized nor what the salient point was. I just remembered that it was crisp and clean (unlike our work and ministry—and certainly unlike my own bizarre existence therein). And so we passionately ping-ponged some more—finally, I guess, calling the feverish match a draw.

In the car on the drive home, I continued to chew on the Mission Statement thing.

Chew. Gag. Chew. I knew that my opinions on Mission Statements had not changed, but I also knew that my friend had asked an exceedingly righteous and important question...of me...and us...and all of us. It wasn't (and isn't) important to me in terms of trying to convince someone to donate funds or time or personal interest in us, but it was (and is) important to me for reflection. For more passion. For the Socratic examined-life. For discipleship. For asking and answering myself about what these years and struggles and memories and learnings and hopes and disasters and gifts have really been about. Unless I know my unwritten, gut-defined, passionate inkling of a Mission Statement...well, what's the point of tomorrow? Damn, why did my friend bring *that* up!

The car rolled along the highway, and Sister Maria was kind enough to receive my sudden, unaimed blurts that were careening off the already-battered dashboard. "Well, we do have a Mission Statement—not that crappy one I wrote last month...but, you know, it's been in every issue of our newsletter for the past umpteen years...you know," (and she com-passionately nodded) "it says that we're no experts...just a bunch of crazy volunteers...doing the best we can with whatever arrives at the door...certainly not able to respond to everything the way every different person wants us to..."

Two-mile silence. Maria watched the unseeable nighttime scenery with that God-given slight-smile that wonderfully speaks of sitting in vigil with a madman...acceptingly. I wasn't finished; perhaps barely begun.

"Aren't those scores of friends who've died of AIDS a 'Mission Statement?' Aren't hospital rooms a 'Mission Statement?' Isn't a recovering addict working on the sewer at Grace House a 'Mission Statement?' Or Brother Greg strumming his guitar at Mass, or Judy scraping windows, or Bob telling a great joke, or Sr. Jane loading a food box, or little Nikalas trying to take his first step, or gentle Kenneth listening to a struggling alcoholic, or Charlie being Santa, or Renee babysitting, or Janice learning new computer skills, or Laurie crying as she consecrates the Communion, or Carol driving folks to job interviews, or...?"

We were back at Grace House by now, even as the Magdalene continued to nod and accept, even as I couldn't seem to stop my rhetorical litany.

"...And what about Cliff working on cars and painting signs, and Wendy working nights to take care of that baby, and young Allen raking leaves for everyone, and Doris grandmaing folks, and wounded folks bouncing back to life...?"

I was clearly speaking to myself. I knew that Maria was well aware of her own Mission Statement, and anyone who looks in her eyes knows that, too. But I knew more than ever that I was trying to come up with a Mission Statement that would satisfy my friend in this particular situation, fearing that they might simply go away, end the relationship, cut me loose if I wasn't acceptable in my definition. And what would the next friend demand in yet another, specific situation, when I didn't make the satisfactory decision? And the next? My gut was tight, my anger was rising, my fears were increasing, my hope for solidarity was oozing.

And then I remembered those old conversations again. Who said this was going to be a cake-walk? How do I expect chaos not to be a part of a chaotic ministry, a chaotic world? What about the folks who put trust and affirmation and support and hope and serenity and joy into our lives constantly?

Seek and embrace the solidarity and grace which whirls around you, Tom!

My friend mailed a note: no, my/our ministry was not enough, not adequate, not

acceptable in its performance and decisions, not consistent. And then: “Remove me from the mailing list.”

I remembered that wonderful/nagging statement from good ol’ Izzy Stone, not too long before his death:

I really owe my success to being a pariah...To be a pariah is to be left alone to see things your own way, as truthfully as you can. Not because you're brighter than anybody else—or your own truth is so valuable. But because, like a painter or a writer or an artist, all you have to contribute is the purification of your own vision, and add that to the sum total of other visions. To be regarded as non-respectable, to be a pariah, to be an outsider, this is really the way to do it. To sit in your tub and not want anything. As soon as you want something, they've got you!

And so I offered a lot of this stuff from my soul to a bunch of folks who sat with me in a couple of our Sharing Groups...and they listened to me...offering no easy answers...and they listened to my passion some more...and still offered no more easy answers...and they continued to sit with me...not about money or threats or losses or success or failure or Mission Statements or other silly things...they simply sat with me again, in the best way they could.

The next morning, as I sat alone trying to make some sense out of weeks of nonsense—of money and bills and Mission Statements and criticisms and ministry and chaos—I heard a knock at the back door. There stood a young man whom I had met over four years ago at our very first AIDS Clinic, a young man I hadn’t seen in well over a year since he had sojourned out-of-state for awhile, a young man who was now thin and leaning against a thick cane, a young man who was crying softly. We embraced tightly. And I knew again—from conversations long ago and from events of these thirty days—wondrously, the abiding grace of sense instead of the nonsense.

MAGIC

[from Old Persian *magus*, sorcerer]

If there is any single, paramount issue in our experience of being with folks in Recovery—or in our community-building journey (or in our entire society?)—it is that of “magical thinking.” It is the stuff that self-sabotage, community-sabotage, and growth-sabotage is made of. It’s a sorcerer’s brew of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ “stages of death”: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance...except magical thinking, of course, totally prevents the pain of needed vulnerability (depression) and the joy of new life (acceptance)...and thus the brew becomes poison.

It is magically deadly because it denies the frustrations of methodical, step-by-step discovery of healthy living; it evaporates (temporarily) the reminders of historical messes, relationships decimated, crimes committed...and even memories of previous magical thinking. It is a deadly, unmelodic rendition of that favorite song of the 60s, “Rescue Me.”

As with magical song lyrics, magical thinking is almost-totally supported by the messages and motions of our society: “ignore it, it will go away”; “make a million in real estate with no-money-down”; “Pretty-Woman-movies”; “No Credit—No Sweat!”; “This car will make you sexy (or attractive, impressive, powerful, thin, rich-looking)”; “Free vacation—No obligation!”; “Well, at least the suburbs are safe”; and on and on.

It starts with the phone call: “Our 35-year-old daughter *really* needs to live in your Community...*really wants* to get into recovery from drugs and alcohol!”

“How long has she been clean and sober?”

“He wants to know how long you’ve been clean and sober, honey...(pause)...She says about 18 hours.”

“Has she been to a recovery meeting?”

“She says no...but she doesn’t know where they are.”

“Is there any reason that she can’t stay with you while she seeks her recovery process?”

“Well...you know...she stole and sold most of our electronics last year...”

Sometimes the calls are almost hilarious in the magical thinking involved, but the craziness is no less deadly. And if we, as a Community, decide to welcome her into residence, the odds are pretty high that magical thinking will prevail—without a hardcore recovery program—and the next step for her will be to quickly “find a man” who will promise to take care of her needs...and she is gone into the realm of the Magic Kingdom (and don’t think that wasn’t named for good reason!). And next year, another call will come from the same parent, asking what on earth they can do, again, for their daughter, to “save her from herself.” Mom doesn’t want to hear the answer (“Nothing. She has to do it for herself.”), and so offers all the reasons that the daughter *can’t* do for herself (then how did she get hold of all those drugs?)...and mom is *very* displeased with our response. And word gets around that we’re “hard asses” and “exclusive” and “unsympathetic.” But

why should this daughter get better? What in our advertisements (“professional liars” someone called them), with our legal system (“A thirty-day treatment program will straighten things out”), with our born-again churches (“If you’d just find Jesus, all of this will go away”).

I wish that the lies of magical thinking worked; that short-term treatment worked; that religious magical thinking would work; that lock-‘em-up-and-throw-away-the-key would work; that a million dollars could be gained with no down-payment; that a new car would make me look/feel better; that K-Mart’s slogan of “The Stuff of Life” were true; that someone would take care of my needs; that life wasn’t, finally, difficult...’cause then I wouldn’t have to struggle with my own demons...or be called a hard-ass...or feel bad at night that I can’t save everyone, including myself, in the Magic Kingdom.

COMMITMENT

[from Latin *committere*, entrust]

I had heard about her, briefly, but I hadn't ever met her. From the off-hand descriptions, muttered by acquaintances of the family, I wasn't sure that I would ever meet her; I wasn't sure that she would have any interest in meeting me...and I wasn't really all that attracted to the possibility, myself. The gist of the comments was that she was tough—very tough—and didn't have much use for men, period. It was whispered once that she was a lesbian—the person actually used the term “dyke” for emphatic comment—and not only that: she was described specifically as a Harley-riding-ass-kicking-leather-suited dyke. Although I stared at the ground during this colorful gossip, and gave no comment, I knew that I was supposed to gasp something like “Yikes!”

I knew her brother, though. And even the few comments I had heard about her seemed so much the opposite of my knowledge of him that I couldn't quite put the family relationship into logical focus. Well, of course, there was no logic to it, but I had to witness that, rather than learn it.

I'll call her brother “Bill.” That wasn't his real name, but it's close to those common American names we encounter everyday, like mine. It also wasn't his name in the reality of daily life, given that he evidenced Down's Syndrome, was diagnosed as “developmentally disabled,” and, like most of his companions, his name was juvenilized into “Billy,” a somewhat bizarre practice we have of making the person's name fit with what we believe to be their intellectual age. So everyone called him Billy, although he was well into his thirties. I had heard that she was the only member of his family who called him Bill.

Bill/Billy was dying, simply because some of his organs had not developed for these added years. But you sure wouldn't know it by his actions. He seemed to be always animated, not just in his joyous, ebullient moments—which were the majority—but, too, in those times when he seemed genuinely downhearted about some mishap that the rest of us might not even notice. Yes, whatever emotion he was feeling, he was *feeling*, and so there was a liveliness to him that almost seemed infectious. When Bill/Billy was exuberantly happy or sad, it seemed to affect the world around him in similar ways; at least, there was no ignoring his passions.

My second-favorite memory of Bill was his literal acceptance of what was said to him. As when I said during the Mass, “And now we offer our heartfelt thanksgivings for all those people in our lives who bring us joy and grace...” *Bang*, there went Bill, loudly and joyfully yelling out the names of everyone on earth (it seemed) who had ever brought him joy and grace! He recited names and names and names—“Oh, and I forgot Ruth!”—and a pause only long enough to gasp for more oxygen before tolling the continuing list of delight and thankfulness. And finally, with the decorum which we so needlessly grasp, I jumped into one of his oxygen-intakes to summarize, “And for all those we cannot always remember but who bring us an abundance of life!” Well, Bill knew—and I knew—that he could come up with at least fifty more names...but he was going to kindly let me off the hook this one time.

I got the phone call on Saturday late-afternoon. Bill was in the emergency room, in bad shape, in the pain of organs shutting down. As I parked the car in a convenient “clergy” space, I saw his family—father, mother, aunt, “other” sister—gathered around

the ER entrance. I approached them and got hugs, plus a confused description of what was happening inside. Before I could try to straighten things out about the diagnosis or prognosis, the voices were drowned by the noise of an approaching—a rapidly approaching—motorcycle, and I noticed that family members were looking over my shoulder.

By the time I turned, she had already set the kickstand of the bike along the red line of the no-parking-zone, and she was marching toward us, looking angry (or was that my uncomfortable distortion?).

“Where is he?” she asked in a deliberate but calm way.

There was a slight pause before Mother allowed, “He’s in one of the rooms on the main hallway...I think they have a curtain drawn around him, but he’s in a room alone.”

“What’s going on?”

“They don’t know exactly. But the doctor says it doesn’t look good.”

“I’m going in.”

And she marched in, throwing the door open widely, driving her boots into the shiny linoleum.

It was hotter than blazes in that parking lot area, but I was sweating more than usual, and I quietly told the family that I was going to see my friend.

As I entered the room, Bill was lying in a partially-elevated bed, moaning sounds that had no ambiguity about them, and his sister was holding his left hand in hers. It appeared to me that in the seventy-five feet of hallway linoleum, this woman had transformed from leather-biker into an angel of mercy.

“What can I do, Bill?” she asked with such tenderness.

“I don’t know...I hurt...I hurt bad...could you hold me like before?”

I haven’t the remotest idea what “before” meant—was it something from their youth together, or some moment in time that was a sacred ritual between them—but suddenly his sister was disrobing from her heavy leathers to her undergarments of cotton blouse and shorts, and just as suddenly she was in the bed with him, enveloping him in her tenderness, rocking him back and forth in a rhythmic dance of balm, as his groans subsided finally into the sleep of finality.

Before he slept, he had said, “Where’s your pretty dress?”

“Oh, Bill,” she smiled, “you know I don’t wear dresses.”

“I mean that pretty dress you wore that day.”

“That was your birthday. That was a long, long time ago.”

“I love you in that pretty dress.”

I quietly left the room, hugged his family wordlessly, walked to my car, and sat in the air-conditioning for several minutes, until my shaking body would allow me to drive.

On the following Wednesday, we buried Bill. The Chapel had filled with family and friends, but his sister—that “Harley-riding-ass-kicking-leather-suited-dyke”—was nowhere to be found, and we had started the service with the “I am Resurrection.” As I prepared to announce the Gospel (not sure exactly what I was going to say, given that I knew Bill understood the Gospel better than I), I looked from behind the altar to see the narthex door open, to see his sister walk down the aisle to the family seats, to see this woman clothed in an out-of-fashion cotton dress, to see her sit down among her family, to see her stare at the casket, to see tears streaming down her stoic face.

Instead of continuing, I sat down. My throat was empty of words; my heart was

filled with joy; my soul was awed; my eyes were liquid; my mind cared not for decorum. Before I continued the service, I sat in the uncomfortable silence of the room, allowing just enough time for me to relish the spiritual dance of Bill and his sister on the altar.

I knew that he and she had offered me grace as rarely imagined.
And I knew that the Christ would be riding a Harley to the cemetery.

TOUCH

[from Old French *tuchier*, contact]

I confess to being surprised by the overwhelming response to the death of Princess Diana. I certainly expected—at first news bulletins, as tears welled in my own eyes—that people around the world would likely be deeply moved by this senseless loss of youth and beauty and adult-adolescence in this famous girl-next-door. But I knew, too, that this was not a “tragedy” in the ancient meaning of that word: a calamitous event that could not be prevented. Yet the media knew a hot story when it sensed one, and we were pulled, one by one, into the inner circle of grievers, and we went to the grieving place, via satellite.

And, *boom*, then we were told that Mother Theresa was dead! Were there tears or any other adequate emotions left to offer? Yes...but somehow on a different plane, a different part of the world’s soul, a different sense of the “dual-tragedies” that were being offered by endless commentators and writers. It seemed that suddenly every person on earth was called to make a statement on which loss was deeper or sadder or more earth-shaking. Still, loss abounded in hearts world-wide, as even the most sophisticated could not seem to easily shirk off the ubiquitous melancholy that the world had somehow lost something in the quick absence of two women—one young/old, the other old/young.

I, too, spent time over the ensuing weeks taking their “inventories,” reviewing their lives—and, as models of very different ways of living, what their lives had meant to me and to my friends and to all those people on planet earth who seemed so affected by it all. But I didn’t seem to get very far in my tentative conclusions, and as the marketplace mementos of these women began to surface everywhere—YES, YOU TOO CAN TREASURE PRINCESS DIANA/MOTHER TERESA FOREVER FOR ONLY \$19.95!—I began to lose interest in the quest within my own soul.

But a few weeks later, literally as I was awaking one morning, I saw these two pictures in my mind of those two women—and in each picture, the young woman and the old woman were *touching* someone. And then it seemed that a thousand pictures went through my brain: more shots of young woman/old woman touching and touching—wherever they went—one with a sense of gladness and connection which went beyond what we would expect of royalty (“Well, they *are* above us, you know!”), and one with a sense of quiet, sacred blessing which might be directly from God (“Well, you know she’s going to be *canonized*, after all!”). I knew then that at least part of this momentous outpouring of emotion had been about being touched—or wanting to be touched—by these two women: to be recognized, to be special, to be acknowledged, to be healed, to be delivered, to be connected, to be human...oh my, to be *touched*.

Perhaps all of this is my own psyche wanting to celebrate the possibilities of connection and touch within a millennium-bound world of anti-touch: be cool; be technocratic; be professional; be rich; buy a Buick Regal, “The Official Car of the Supercharged Family;” be elusive; buy Lotus software and *Do Business*...instead of dreaming and playing and telling stories; do lethal injections; clone for perfection; punish the poor; worship the Dow-Jones; screw “them;” keep your distance; don’t get *involved*; don’t be a fool; take a poll; *ad nauseum*.

I remembered that princess leaning over to touch—to heal?—the stump of the amputated leg of that young boy who had stepped on a landmine. And the returned touch

of the boy on the thin arm of the anorexic princess. Who was healed?

I remembered the old Mother-nun holding the head of a dying beggar...and of him touching the shoulder of the dying old Mother-nun. Who was healed?

I remembered sitting in my office years ago listening to a psychiatrist (who sought “therapy”) rehearse the vacuity of his barren, serious, clinical life. My heart ached in the listening, as we sat a respectable ten feet apart in solemn chairs. At the end of the session, as he stood to leave, I told him that we were going to hug, and before he could offer the objections I knew would be forthcoming, I hugged him tightly. His eyes filled with tears, but his first words were, “How do you dare do that! Don’t you know you can be sued by a client for that kind of behavior!” I responded with another hug...and suddenly the two of us were laughing hard. After that, he sought a hug before *and* after each meeting together. He reported, too, that he was touching each of his patients in the psychiatric hospital as he made daily rounds—a touch of the hand or putting his hand on their shoulder or even a quick, gentle hug before he left the room—and, somehow, they were acting differently with him. But he told me, with a smile, that we should both be ready for lawsuits.

I remembered Doris standing behind the altar on a Wednesday evening in the Chapel of St. Dismas during the prayers of the Healing Rite, suddenly saying a prayer of thanks for the sacredness of that chapel, where we could touch and connect in so many ways, including the laying-on-of-hands.

I remembered listening to a Catholic priest tell me how he had been warned by his diocesan office not to touch children at all—except as “necessary” in situations like baptism—because of the media reports of priests who had displayed pedophilic behavior. He asked me how he could be a priest if he was to be anxious about touching *anyone* in his world.

I remembered the young woman—and then a middle-aged man—recount their fears of touch, after being sexually-abused in horrific childhood encounters with family and adult friends. They were both dying spiritually for lack of safe touch.

I remembered the hundreds of times I had incidentally touched men in my life—in animated conversations or in greetings or departures—only to have them “naturally” recoil in surprise and unstated fear. And I knew well how they and I had been “trained” in this bizarre world.

I remembered the last time my father kissed me on the cheek before his death—and kissing him back as he lay in his casket—knowing that I could not, at age twenty-three, go through the rest of my life without embracing men and offering that memorial of my father.

I remembered the endless stories of the Nazarene going from houses to streets to temples to wells to marketplaces, touching and holding and kissing and embracing both men and women in his healings and “miracles.” I remembered, too, the Pieta.

I remembered the very first AIDS patient I encountered lying on a gurney in an emergency room—surrounded by lots of medical staff—who whispered in my ear as I drew closer, “I’ve been here for almost an hour...and *no one* has touched me! Will you touch me?”

I remembered so many children and grown-up children tell me that their only vivid memories of touch were connected to spankings.

I remembered the formal dinner at the 25th Reunion of my prep school, when,

amid friendly but exceedingly-polite toasts to days gone by, I stood and said, “Well, I guess what I remember tonight is how scared we all were of each other during our adolescence...and how much I’d like to hug some of you folks before we part again”...and then joined in the pandemonium of classmates and wives laughing and hugging and yelling in utter joy.

I remembered a self-described “redneck-good-old-boy” recalling sadly during a Retreat how he had been conditioned to loathe and abuse gay people...and then crossing the room and gently embracing a gay man who sat among us.

I remembered telling my parents—when I was five—that the Santa Claus in the local store had hands exactly like our neighbor, old Mr. Knotts...and I knew that because old Mr. Knotts had picked me up and held me one day after an especially painful bicycle crash. I was shocked later to learn the “truth” about Santa—yes, old Mr. Knotts—but always grateful I knew his kind touch.

Well, I remembered a lot more, too. And I realized that all any of us can do is only what we can do in our own immediate worlds. But we can’t let touching go away, anymore than we can pretend that we don’t desperately need it, just about everyday on earth. Somehow—the Christ says within us—the world we’re creating right now isn’t going to give us what we’ve needed since before birth. Somehow—he says to us—we’ve got to get back to something very holy and wholesome and wholly human.

The touch of healing each other.

Perhaps when someone asks me for my Christmas wish-list or my wish for the New Year or when I’m trying to blow out all those candles on the birthday cake next August...well, I think that’s going to be my wish.

REMEMBER

[from Latin *re-memorari*, to be mindful of]

I first met Greg when we were volunteering labor on the renovation of the house that the Community intended for recovering women—the house that we later decided was too small for that purpose. He and I happened to get paired-up by the common task of painting cabinets in the kitchen, a task which allowed us to casually begin the recitation of our stories—our histories and hopes, including the reasons we both ended up painting this kitchen. I somehow knew, almost from the first moments of dialogue, that he—a recovering alcoholic—and I—who had never, ever even been drunk—would likely find common ground of Companionship in the future; something told me, as we continued our stories, that he and I might even grow old together.

A while later, after he had spent several months in Community—and provided virtually every Mass with wonderful songs and narrative—he wrote and gave to me the following, which I asked to share with others; he agreed.

Since the weather has turned bitter cold, I've been reminded of something very special that happened a few winters ago.

In December of 1993, I relapsed after three and a half years of complacent—and very tenuous—sobriety. During those previous sober days, I had accomplished a lot: my musical expression began to progress for the first time since the early Seventies, and I got some very strong glimpses of a personal realm of possibilities that I had stayed mostly numb to during my drinking and drugging years.

Eventually, though, I came to minimize and discount the very things I had seen to be good and positive early in my sobriety. I felt, too, that I wasn't moving along quite fast enough financially. In other words, there were still problems, and life was still difficult sometimes. I still had nothing spiritual to sustain me, and I slowly re-embraced modern cynicism as a means of dealing with life. I finally—most certainly—drank again. I'll spare you the gory details. Suffice it to say that after a month, I had still been unable to entirely numb the way I felt. I was deeply, severely depressed, and in worse physical shape than the time before: a walking/breathing exposed raw-nerve. In addition, my sense of emotional aloneness and separation was stronger and deeper than ever. Even after a month of going to recovery meetings, working, and physically dragging myself through the days, I found myself still incapable of laughing, crying, or even making one single connection to any human feelings other than fear, bitterness, and hatred. I was in hell, and I remember thinking one night, 'when will compassion or love or any kind of tenderness ever return...when will it come back?!'

I had taken a temporary job in a hospital cafeteria, my task being to deliver giant carts of food trays to floor units and then collecting them later for washing. One of the people on the dishwashing line was from the 'state school': a lovely, enthusiastic, child-like woman in her early twenties with Down Syndrome, named Louise. She was very friendly, and, of course, my dealings with her were on an entirely "yeah, well,

whatever” basis, although I did share with her when we met that she possessed one of my favorite names. She liked that.

One day—about a week into the job and about five weeks into my sobriety—I ended up sitting across from Louise at the lunch table, eating what I had packed that morning. I was fairly irritated that day, already tired of the job and even more tired of her chatter. I was down to my chocolate-chip cookies, and I had packed more than I could eat. Ready to go smoke away the remainder of lunch time alone, I realized that I’d been kind of gruff and short with Louise, and so, on impulse, I leaned across the table and asked her if she would share my dessert with me.

I expected another short burst of grateful chatter, but what I got was beyond any of that. Right there, looking straight into her eyes from only two feet away, I watched a huge, crocodile tear spill down her cheek, and then I heard a declaration from Louise: ‘I sure do love you.’

I didn’t know how or why all of that happened. All I knew is that—right then, at that particular moment—IT WAS BACK. I’d actually hooked up with another human being, and I seemed at least as choked up as she. I stayed to munch cookies and yak for a while, before going off for solitary smokes.

Now maybe that moment in time falls into the category of the sappiest story you can imagine, or maybe it’s a miracle in the lunchroom. But what I know is that, on the one hand, it was a powerful and important sacrament for me...and, on the other hand, I managed to re-embrace my self-pity and cynicism within a very short period of time...and, of course, start drinking again. As we say, go figure.

The biggest roadblocks for me in my recovery have been the issues of spirituality and working with others. ‘I cannot bring myself to improvise a conscious contact with God. I know nothing of the heart and mind and will of God, and, furthermore, I resent those who say they do.’ Somewhere along the line, I equated working with others to helping others. ‘What help can my sick, relapsing self possibly be to any other human being?’ This has been the nature of the running internal monologue that has threatened my existence and thwarted my true recovery.

Presently I have fourteen months of sobriety. I can’t say that I don’t have some rough moments—and *please* drop a heavy rock on my big toe if you *ever* hear me say that I’ve ‘made it.’ What I can say with confidence is that I’ve made some connections. Since I met Louise, I’ve had a bunch of other moments when I knew for a fact that I had been blessed, that I was in the conscious presence of grace. And so have you: the birth of a child, the touch of a friend, the intuitive closeness of a loved one, or something else you truly know. All grace-full reminders. My own conscious contact with God is in the daily *re-membering* of those moments that are so transitory, yet somehow always there. They don’t go away. They were *always* there.

When I work *with* another human being—whether it’s on recovery, music, chocolate chip cookies, or some job task, there’s no telling who might be

‘helped.’ It’s a perfectly undisclosed mystery.

If I wish to put an end to being alone and therefore separate, I might have to first stop insisting on being alone and therefore separate. If I want something different in my life for a change, I might have to first spend a little time every day doing something different for a change.

Re-membering is nothing more than giving life to any one thing I’ve ever seen or felt. I’ve spent altogether too much time remembering my fears, resentments, and self-importance.

I sure do love you, too, Louise.

Later, Greg became a Servant-Leader—a monk—in the Order of Christian Workers, taking the spiritual name of Brother Gregory Francis de Sales.

EMERGENCY

[from Latin *emergere*, to plunge]

If there was anything further from my mind on the thirtieth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood on January 6, it was that a large crowd of Companions, friends, family members, and colleagues would gather in the Chapel of St. Dismas—totally unbeknownst to me—and there surprise me with a sacred blessing of my ministry!

Matt had called me at Grace House with a supposed “emergency”: he told me that one of the bathrooms at St. Dismas House (in fact, the one we had just totally renovated!) had a broken water line...that water was everywhere...that he needed me, quickly, to help him. I was dead tired from the day, but I had a vivid image of that water cascading through the hallways, and so, in my grubbiest work clothes, headed up the street; Sr. Maria was insistent on going “to help,” so she joined me in the car.

As we arrived at St. Dismas, I was suddenly surprised to see lots of cars on the street—most of which I recognized—and I instantly began wondering what on earth could be going on. And as I drove in the driveway, the headlights caught the front porch...and there sat Sr. Jane, vested in her alb and scapular, all ready for Mass. What? She greeted me...and then, of all things, asked me to come to the garage, which is attached to the Chapel building. And there were monks and nuns, vesting themselves for a service. Jane, in her unique way, simply told me to follow her to the Chapel—no questions, no answers.

As she escorted me along the walkway in the dark, I caught a quick glance through one of the Chapel windows...and it took my breath away. In the brightness of that sacred room sat *so* many folks, some of whom I hadn’t seen in months, plus family members who had attended that ordination thirty years before. I stopped abruptly, as the demanding emotions of the past couple of months welled inside of me, and—leaning against Sr. Jane—I began to cry uncontrollably. Somehow, I managed to enter the Chapel, to find the chair which had been placed in front of the altar among my Companions, and to begin to hear the words of blessing and re-dedication.

I couldn’t stop crying. The joy was so immense that it almost seemed painful at moments: to hear my father’s name, while seeing my mother’s face across the room; to hear words written by each of my three, far-away children, spoken by Companions in that room; to hear words from two of my dearest, longtime clergy “co-conspirators,” Tom Niccolls and Michael Dwinell—words again read by other Companions present; to feel the hands of all these special souls on my head and shoulders, as they blessed me anew in my life and work; to hear my sister’s wondrous voice singing her own blessing; to know that so many folks—including dear Maria—had spent so much time and effort in making this all happen...the tears of joy just kept flowing.

SHAM

[derived from English dialect *sham*, shame]

I don't think that for most of us Lent magically starts or stops on any given dates. Sure, the church has to put it on the calendar somewhere, but I think most of us are aware of the demons and the temptations pretty much all the time, even when we pretend to ignore it all.

We know, too—whatever our politics or spiritual leanings—that our demons wax and wane in various cycles of years and social-political-economic peculiarities; right now, in our nation-life, we're in sort of a meanness, a coldness, a me-first-ness that belies the sacred parts of us...and so it's good, I guess, that we're back in the desert, supposedly looking at all of that temptation of power and greed and chauvinism and exclusion. I wonder, though—when someone finally shouts, “Hey, Lent is over!”—what will be the last sentence I hear rumbling around in my brain, gut, and heart?

This week I came across one of the last sentences that beckoned the soul of Thomas Merton during a Lenten season decades ago; this luminous monk said that our desert-time, our opportunity to come to terms with our Christness, was always endangered by the temptation to make the desert a sham, whether we live in a monastery, in a pin-stripe suit, or in a poor, beat-up neighborhood. He called it the “sham-desert### ...a wondrous term, I think.

Sometimes when I see fancy, full-page ads in “spiritual” magazines, promising that the “inner-self” will suddenly bloom during a “sacred cruise” through the Caribbean, I think of the thousands of ways we create to keep from truly experiencing the desert, from knowing that Christness within. We know it's going to be demanding, lonely, scary, and downright humiliating to enliven the Christ—nothing like the gentle, balmy wind that might sweep across our bronzed bodies on the Caribbean deck—and so we pursue just about anything to find comfort from the prospect.

I think of the dozens and dozens of men (mostly Hispanic) who stand on the nearby corner each morning praying for day work. No romancing of the inner-self on that corner. They seem to know the desert well...and yet they seem to have more community than anything I've experienced in civic clubs or fancy digs. I think, too, of a comment someone made to me last fall when I spoke of getting some labor help to finish the roof on Grace House: “Thank God for the Mexicans! My friends up North tell me they have to pay a *living wage* to get hourly labor there!” Yeah, I bit my lip, remembering how the men run toward each slowing vehicle at that corner, their arms waving, their voices pleading for anything at all...any kind of work, any hours. “Yeah, jump in the bed of my new pickup, señor...and I'll pay you squat for a day's labor in the sham-desert.”

Sometimes when someone is talking to me offhand about “religious experiences” or the “spiritual life,” or Lent, my mind is quietly translating that into the reality of Community living: 18 toilets, 10 water heaters, heat and air systems, thermostats, roofing shingles, faucets, and door locks...none of which probably cause anyone grief on the Caribbean sail. I think of used cars breaking down. And neighborhood mothers who sell their blood to buy diapers. And corporate welfare, spin doctors, fake careers, and mutual funds. Perhaps a bumper-sticker, spied by Brother Gregory this week, describes the real desert experience best: If You're Not Outraged, You're Just Not Paying Attention. And

yet I know that someone, if they could hear my thoughts, would kindly say, “Oh, Father, don’t take things so seriously...life’s so short!”

Sham-desert.

I think of reading newspaper articles of local Christian churches which seem to be in some sort of millennial competitive madness to out-build each other “for the glory of God.” One goes one million; the next ups it to five million; the next tries to eliminate all other bidders for God’s favor by leaping to twenty million. And I think of what effect all of that will have on next fall’s United Way campaign, when the Christians can’t quite make that community pledge because we didn’t want to disappoint our up-and-coming pastor, who’s staking his religious career on the ingathering of twenty mill, “for Jesus.” Oh well, the new-speak voices of laid-back spirituality tell us, it’ll all be okay—if only we’ll ignore what’s going on around us in non-living wages, desperate laborers, blood-for-diapers, empty stomachs, grander “sanctuaries.”

Sham-desert.

But something about the real desert is the basic learning that we better not mess with it. It’s *real* out there. It’s hot and dry and filled with all sorts of life we don’t dare ignore—it demands a closer look at everything, lest we end up a skeleton, either spiritually or literally. It means coming to terms with such odd creatures as justice and equality and interconnectedness and mutual concern and cooperation. It means that things catch up with us when we play make-believe with our Christness...just as Isaiah told his own people. Sham-desert, he said, is far scarier than the real thing.

If I am in the real desert this year (and I’m never wise enough to know if I truly am), I’ll have a pretty good sense at the far side of the wilderness that Christness involves talking back to the demons as Jesus did. Shouting at them. Irritating them. Standing up to them. Laughing at them. Saying loudly to them, “Hell, no! That sham-desert stuff you’re peddling will kill our souls, all!” But I’d better remember that the shouts are aimed at my *own* demons.

But more than anything else, I think I’ll have an inkling of what Jesus knew as he exited the real desert toward Jerusalem: the sham-desert demons tell me that the Christ within me is a noun; the real desert experience will convince me that the Christ is a verb.

ASHES

[from Old English *asce*, residue, remains]

My friend—a plumbing supplier and a good man who has been extremely kind to this Community in offering parts for our renovation projects—offered me his own wonderful, classic “Lenten story”:

Although of Baptist background and persuasion, he got interested last year in pursuing the Lenten journey in ways that his religious tradition didn’t normally offer, mainly to get a “sense” of what that pilgrimage might feel like in some new way.

So, filled with enthusiasm for this new quest, he decided to show up at one of the local Episcopal parishes early on Ash Wednesday morning to receive the imposition of ashes, which meant, of course, that he would be expected to “wear” the ashes on his forehead all day and night, in the spirit of “From ashes you come, and to ashes you will return.”

After the service, he headed to work, but stopped at one of his favorite diners to get a quick bite of breakfast. He sat at the counter, as usual, ordered his breakfast, and sat for a few minutes thinking about his faith, his work...and his ashes. He realized that he was sort of “proud” of having tried this new thing, and his ashes were a visible sign of his venture.

Another worker came into the diner, sat down next to my friend on one of the counter stools, kindly introduced himself, then exchanged early-morning pleasantries about the weather and so forth. There wasn’t much more discussion or talk—except when this fellow asked my friend to pass the sugar and cream, please.

Finally, it was time for work, and my friend got up to leave, and turned to offer a simple farewell to his counter-mate. The fellow responded: “Yeah, it was good to meet ya, too”...and a pause...and then, “And, by the way, I don’t know if anyone’s mentioned it to ya or not, but you’ve got some crap on your forehead that ya need to clean off....”

QUIRKS

- [a) an abrupt twist or curve or
- b) a peculiar trait; origin unknown]

I just got back from the jail. Actually, the “Low-Risk Detention Center.” A jail by any other name is still a jail.

As many times as I’ve been there—or to its brother-buildings in other cities or states—it never gets any better. In summer, the heat is stifling. In winter, the mood is stone cold..

The long sign-in line seems to never move, and there I am standing with the folks who are wanting to see the folks who don’t have high-priced lawyers, who can’t (or won’t) make bail.

I always try to remember at least two things as I’m waiting to get to the jailer’s window: first, I remind myself not to romanticize the guilt or innocence of those who wait for visitors...and those who have no visitors. I’ve been around long enough to know that children of God do lamentable things; some children of God, of course, don’t get caught, or they commit acts which are “white-collar” in nature—meaning, usually, that they got away with a lot more money than did the folks in this concrete edifice.

Secondly, I always try to remind myself—especially when I’m feeling most uncomfortable with the fact that most of the visitors are “different” than I (educationally, economically, socially)—that these are the very folks with whom Jesus of Nazareth spent most of his time...not preaching or teaching, but simply hanging out: eating, drinking, gossiping, trading stories, laughing, mourning. He probably didn’t get treated as well as I do by the guards when he visited someone in jail; he didn’t have business cards.

After a long wait, my “appointment time” arrives, and I know that I’m about to see my friend, but it will be chaos from start to finish, not only because of the cacophony of the visiting room, but, too, the bedlam of emotional restrictions on all of us.

And so I enter the room. There is already the yelling of voices on each side of the Plexiglas, as lovers, parents, children, spouses, friends try to communicate love or anger or concern through the little finned-metal hole, with the rhythm of visitors doing the mouth-to-hole-to-ear-to-prisoner yelling of declarations...and then the prisoner doing the same dance in response. Almost no one sits in the provided chairs; no, you can’t do the mouth-hole-ear dance between partners while you’re seated in a chair. I wonder what we all look like—dancing and yelling and trading places around the finned-metal hole—when we are watched on the surveillance cameras. The guards look sad as they watch.

I spot my friend as he searches for my face. Our eyes meet, and we both discover the one available finned-metal hole in the Plexiglas wall. I know that my pulse—which often goes at about sixty beats—is now pumping pretty good, probably around ninety. I wonder why...and I hope that it’s sheer gladness. I know, too, that I’m going to be highly ineffective in communicating with my friend, mainly due to my hearing aid trying to adapt to all the yelling. Once again, as on endless visits, I wonder how to put my ear to that finned-metal hole while also trying to read my friend’s lips. My dance must look hilarious. So I concentrate mainly on reading lips.

“You doing all right?”

“Yeah, but I need some super-glue.”

Totally unprepared for that response—thinking, of course, that my lip-reading has

already failed me—I shout, “What? You need what?”

My friend smiles on purpose, displaying a front tooth which has obviously and recently broken in half. I smile back, hoping that he lip-reads too, and shout again, “How did that happen?”

“Nothing major. Hard bread!”

We laugh together.

“Is there anything you really need?”

“Naw, I’m doing okay.”

“Well, I brought you a book...a Hazleden book...a book of meditations for men...one of those daily books...but it’s good reading...you can read a lot or a little whenever you want....”

He smiled as if I had brought him the Star of India; I wished I could have thought of better reading. To cover the growing emotional swelling in my throat, I yelled, “Hey, I don’t do well in here ‘cause it’s so hard to hear...I might need to write about you and this for my own soul...is that okay with you?”

“By all means.”

“Anyway, Brother Gregory is waiting outside to see you, too...so I’m going to head out...but I only want you to know that I love you and I miss you...” I don’t know if he heard the miss-you part, but his lips formed the words And-I-Love-You, and our hands touched the Plexiglas. I motioned to Greg to take my place at the finned-metal hole.

In the parking lot sat our ‘78 Plymouth extended-body van—filled with all my construction tools that my jailed friend had borrowed so many times—and that beat-up old van was collecting ninety-plus heat just like some tin box that Paul Newman crawled into to do “solitary” time in *Cool Hand Luke*. So I sat in the heat for a couple of minutes, and I knew I was going to do myself a favor by crying for awhile, but I didn’t want to get caught crying in the parking lot—you know, since I have business cards and all that—so I cried alone, undetected, for one of my many “adopted” sons on Route 69 headed to St. Dismas.

Part of me is mad as hell; the larger part of me is proud as hell. Tears come from both.

The part that’s angry wants to rail against computer glitches that put someone in jail when he’s not supposed to be. Against the human frailties that cause the justice system to somehow forget to tell computers that bail has already been made, that a lawyer has already been retained, that a hearing was already supposed to be held. Against the utter snail’s-pace of technical mistakes that somehow don’t get straightened out while someone’s in unrighteous custody. The anger—yes, of course—comes from powerlessness.

The greater part that’s proud knows that my friend and Resident-Companion in this spiritual community has busted his butt for almost a year now to do everything “right.” I’ve watched him struggle in so many ways, and come out the other end with dignity and growth. I’ve watched him work two and three jobs at a time in order to make enough money to pay restitution for previous addictive behaviors. I’ve watched him bring his children to our Community every week, to learn new ways to be a father...really a father. I’ve watched him learn new construction skills, and then realize what a good job he’s done for someone. I’ve watched him go from an uncomfortable-therefore-cocky guy to become a declarer-of-honest-emotions; someone who toyed with the liturgy initially,

but who now takes his turn in celebrating the Healing Rite and the Eucharist in our Chapel. I've watched him make amends for past transgressions, even as he's grown to understand that humility is a gift, not a joke. I've watched as he's grown more intimate with himself and others...and there are times when my buttons almost pop as I look across a room at him. I would gladly claim him as a son. And there are others—men and women I would gladly claim as sons and daughters.

Even in the midst of this, we both know that there are no guarantees, that he may “go back out” at some point, that I may be called to love him in another bad situation of his own making; if so, I'll be called to my own judgment: do I really *live* what I believe?

Yet, tonight he and I will both sit in rooms, waiting for the court to decide on the writ of habeas corpus. I will sit hoping that he remembers, this night, of his growth and achievements. I will sit hoping he knows that he is loved—by Companions and nuns and monks and priests, a crowd he probably *never* imagined would love him.

I will sit hoping that he knows how proud the Nazarene would be of him, even in that Plexiglas room.

I will sit hoping that a judge will allow me to list all the things that this young man has done to prove that he's an increasingly responsible adult...an increasingly responsible father...an increasingly responsible man, even with the same—or different—quirks you and I have.

I will sit tonight hoping that others in my life—“sisters” and “brothers” in this Community—will know how proud I am of them when they continue the struggles, when they work so hard to put past stuff behind them, when they become the persons they so much have wanted to be deep inside.

I guess the only way they'll know is if I keep telling them.

PERFECT

[from Latin *perficere*: to make or do thoroughly]

In our continuing search for the “perfect” way to explain ourselves as a Community, as an Order—our Mission Statement, our journey together, our struggle for inclusiveness—we find that our descriptions are always about people and stories of people, and, while that has seemed a frustrating process, it reminds us more and more that it reflects the gospels themselves: encounter, event, learnings, new-life possibilities...next encounter. But how do we refine this life together into a statement that makes sense to the rest of the world?

Recently, we have connected with a national organization called “The Center for Progressive Christianity,” and in reading their own statement of understandings and objectives, we have found similar words and voices. And so, in translating their words into our own, we have, perhaps, found a way of giving “strangers” a sense of our purpose and our welcome:

Companions of the St. Dismas Community of the Order of Christian Workers attempt to live as *progressive* Christ-followers, by which we mean:

We proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as our Teacher for the journey to God’s domain; we honor, too, the faithfulness of people who have their own sacred names for the journey to God's realm;

We understand that our sharing of bread and cup in the name of the Christ to be a continuing act of God's feast for *all* peoples;

We take seriously and joyously the promise that the Christ lives within us and within all people; we believe that the presence of God is offered in any given moment, and we attempt to discern, individually and together, the vocation to which we are called, doing the best we can;

We seek to learn from—rather than to worship—the wisdom writings of our ancestors and contemporaries;

We claim no special powers or authority as "professionals" and/or "experts" in this ministry and work; as volunteers—without salaries—our incentive is the mutual learning and encouragement of community, and that is enough;

We welcome all sorts and conditions of people to join in our liturgy and in our shared life as Companions, including, but not limited to: committed pilgrims and questioning skeptics, heterosexuals and homosexuals, females and males, those of all races and cultures, those of all classes and differing talents, as well as the wounded, the outcast, the despairing, and the hopeful ...without imposing on any of them the necessity of becoming anything other than their sacred, true selves;

We believe that the way we treat all people—and ourselves—is the honest and vital way that we declare our beliefs;

We find more grace in the spiritual journey than in predetermined destinations;

We perceive that work and ministry which involve the sharing of hospitality, shelter, food, clothing, spiritual intimacy, healing, mutual learnings, and the special needs of children are at the very heart of life;

We recognize that our journey together entails costly discipleship: mutual forgiveness, joyful solidarity, responsive and responsible behaviors, servant-leadership, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege, as has always been the tradition of the Body of Christ.

EXUBERANCE

[from Latin *exuberare*, out of abundance]

Emboldened, I guess, by the statement of who we are and what we hope for, we have written a more intimate (passionate?) statement to put on our first-ever Community T-shirts:

As for Us
we will live this Journey in community,
risking to love and be loved,
stretching toward forgiveness and mutual respect,
growing in courage to be ourselves fully,
healing into wisdom and integrity,
transforming through hope,
recovering by grace...
We will listen intently,
serve gladly, share openly,
trust joyfully, live gratefully,
dream purposefully, and
celebrate exuberantly!

SUSPECT

[from Latin *suscipere*, to watch]

I suspect that Homo sapiens (from the Latin "man" + "wise") is actually the most dangerous and destructive creature on earth.

I suspect that since we Americans are presently the *most* powerful and affluent Homo sapiens on Earth, we are *most* tempted to be the *most* damaging to its future, simply because history loudly testifies that the most powerful often emphasize the “man” over the “wise.”

I suspect that the earth will survive Homo sapiens, continuing in its course, altered but still turning, healing for maybe a billion years.

I suspect that we current Homo sapiens will leave our own remnant in the earthly crust...one that will be, likely, a thin layer of pink plastic.

I suspect that Grace is offered to me in every moment of every day...and I can perceive only moments of it now and then, 'cause I'm too busy looking for it.

I suspect that a supportive letter or call or visit from a dear friend is one of the ultimate joys of life.

I suspect that if anything ever really brings this nation to its knees (not in prayer, but in collapse), it will be the demons of prejudice in our individual and national souls.

I suspect that profound evil is being done to us, to others, and to our environment by multi-national corporations; I suspect that I will never truly understand why we let that happen to us.

I suspect that being held in someone's arms is the basic and primordial need for all human beings at all ages.

I suspect that we will probably not have the good sense to follow the advice and wisdom which General/President Dwight Eisenhower tried to give us decades ago in his "Military-Industrial" speech.

I suspect that there are more kind, caring people on the face of the earth than there are abusive, damaging people.

I suspect that if "community" is ever identified with one person or one "leader," it has no chance for growth and life.

I suspect that when Jesus included women so dramatically in his community, he acknowledged for eternity the power of the feminine in both sexes.

I suspect that Mary the Magdalene will always be my favorite biblical character—whether “legendary” or not—for her realism, her commitment to others, her selfness, her patience, her commonness, her aura of enigma.

I suspect that most of our "work" on ourselves is a masquerade for really not *wanting* to know ourselves.

I suspect that, most of the time, we each embrace victimhood.

I suspect that if each of us would take one day each year, to sit with a spiritual friend—someone we trusted implicitly—to slowly and methodically and soulfully go over each and every entry in our previous year's checkbook register, we would gain some *actual* perception on “who we are” and “what we believe.”

I suspect that one of the most heartening stories I've heard in a long time involved a single mother who—each month as she paid her bills—gathered her 10, 12, and 15 year-old kids around the dining table, explaining to them why she was spending money

on each item, and why, in the middle of their severe economic pressures, it was still necessary to send a check to El Salvador or to inner-city Atlanta for the children there.

I suspect that there actually is a time for each and every thing under the sun.

I suspect that trying to live a somewhat sane and healthy life in the present world is a matter of great heroism.

I suspect that spending \$100,000,000 to enter a boat in the America's Cup Race is a blasphemy against the poor.

I suspect that I blaspheme against the poor daily, just less obviously.

I suspect that if we tell children that God will hurt them or "take" them or send them to "hell," we are committing severe child abuse...and prostituting virtually everything the Nazarene had to say.

I suspect that if we continue to abandon the public school system, we will reap the disastrous consequences for generations to come.

I suspect that if we expect the TV to be a babysitter, it will ...with consequences we fully understand in our souls.

I suspect that our denial that overpopulation is the "bottom line" in virtually all social problems on this planet will ultimately lead us to a place of horrors.

I suspect that every time we offer the answer "Lock ###em up" to some social problem, we are inwardly giving up all of our own participation in real problem-solving.

I suspect that the Disciples were chosen not on the basis of any sort of personal "perfection," but rather on the basis of how much they were willing to risk.

I suspect that we have the choice for discipleship in any given moment in our entire lives.

I suspect that if our "dreams" are of things like Honda Accords (as a recent ad suggested), we might ask ourselves what our nightmares are.

I suspect that if I were young, a member of a minority, and living in a ghetto, I would surely be a member of a gang—the dictionary definition being "group"—just as there are suburban-civic-political-religious gangs in every city or town.

I suspect that each of us knows, deep within our hearts and souls, that "Christianity" as we now know it is simply the "State Church" of the U.S., with only rare connection to the historical Jesus.

I suspect that our apathy (from the Greek "no passion###) might be altered when the ozone withers, when the global warming becomes very inconvenient.

I suspect that the real blessings of this life (instead of the "stuff" we peddle and accumulate) are the continuous perceptions of the Christ which we see and feel in each other.

I suspect that one of the great ironies of life is that those who feel the worst about themselves, deep down inside, are the very ones who are trying to make others in their image...

I suspect that the hottest place I have ever been was in a new Habitat for Humanity house in South Phoenix, while putting sheetrock on the walls in the middle of July.

I suspect that among the most glorious sights I have witnessed was that of a Hispanic family working on their new house with the volunteers from Habitat in South Phoenix.

I suspect that watching the kids approach Santa at the Annual St. Dismas

Christmas Party is the most penetrating tableau of reality that I'm given each year.

I suspect that, if the "unexamined life is not worth living," then the incessantly-examined life is not really *lived*...

I suspect that I rarely learn much about myself or my world when "I'm havin' a good time."

I suspect that "havin' a good time" is okey-dokey, too.

I suspect that virtually every thing I've ever learned that was helpful to me—or every wonderful experience I've had or every trusted friend I've known—was preceded by hesitancy or inner fear...and it was only in the letting go—in the *allowing*—that the grace and the gifts arrived.

I suspect that the greatest turmoil and struggles in life—including our daily journey in this Community—are with those elusive icons of *control* and *forgiveness*.

I suspect that this family of "outcasts" and "incasts"—this family of struggle and joy that stretches through this Community, this neighborhood, and even now across this world of Companions—is the greatest gift I've ever allowed...and most of it comes continuously by talking back to hesitancy and fear...by simply *showing up*.

I suspect that I never imagined—or believed—that the struggle could be this difficult...or the family this breathtakingly glorious.

I suspect—as Rilke hinted in his poetry, that when I give up trying to *find* "happiness," I allow *joy* to alight on my heart.

ANOINT

[from Latin *inungere*, to smear or rub in]

And the next day came...and the stable had to be cleaned...and the homeless ones were sent on their way, even though they had not the slightest idea of what the way would be. Everything that had seemed so utterly safe and secure the night before—the birth, the joy, the tears, the sharing of meager food—was now only a fleeting memory in the reality of today. They shuffled, then—this rag-tag lot of dispossessed and newfound friends—to other streets and back alley shelters, hoping against hope to find another place, another kindly innkeeper who might have an empty stall to offer.

The mother was cold and tired, and knew that the Little One needed more nourishment, and so they stopped in a vacant doorway, where she huddled that hungry mouth to her young breast. Passersby offered a glance of detachment, busy as they were with their own struggles to survive. Just another mother in another doorway. It mattered not.

The baby's father stood above her in that dark doorway, looking down once again in amazement, wondering again how all of this had happened so quickly, wondering again how he could explain to his family and friends the shame he had brought on his lineage by this pregnancy and birth. Everything that was thought holy and respectable and honorable in his family and tribe was now shattered by the birth of this boy-child. He had cried in shame, he had cried in joy all night; there were no tears left.

A shabby man stopped suddenly before the mother, knelt down before the nursing child, and said, "Oh my...look at this! A newborn to give us all hope! I am poor like you, wee thing, but I have a crust of bread that might keep your momma nourished..." He laid the crust in her small hand, offered a toothless smile, and stepped into the morning shadows.

Having watched this from another, nearby doorway, a swarthy slave from some eastern land summoned his courage, and knelt before the woman with child. He spoke a language that no respectable Nazarene would understand, but there was passion in his eyes, and as he spoke those unknown words, a tear formed on his cheek. Yet suddenly he smiled and offered the mother a jar of oil—worth at least a meal or two on the black market—then bowed low, arose in new dignity, and walked away to join the previous man.

Moments later, an old foreign couple approached the doorway, bent over, and looked into the baby's eyes; the woman inquired, "Born just this week?"

"Yes," the mother said with a proud smile, "last night, in fact."

"Oh, dear thing, you must be so tired from all of this!"

But the mother simply looked down at the child, holding him closer to the partial warmth of her own body.

The old husband spoke. "Alas, we are poor like you. But I trade cloth when I can obtain some...and we have the scrap of a scarf here that might offer some warmth to the boy. Here, please take this without shame or thanks...and then pass it along to another baby one day, and ask that mother to pass it along one day to another mother. That way, perhaps the tattered cloth will come back on a far-future day to our great, great grandchildren."

Then the old couple laid their hands, one on the other, to the baby's brow, offered

a blessing, and slowly walked away, arm in arm. As they neared the corner of the main street, the old man turned back and said loudly, “Remember what the holy ones say: every child is born into the world with a message to deliver!”

The mother glanced at the worried face of her new, older husband, and then studied the newborn peace that suckled at her breast. Something almost inaudible was offered.

“What is it you say, wife?” the father asked quietly.

She repeated the sentence to her infant.

“I still didn’t hear it,” her husband said louder.

“Oh, nothing,” she said. “I was simply asking our son if he knew what message he had come to offer the world.”

And then there was silence between them as they continued to huddle in the doorway. The father handed the bread crust to his wife, put the small vial of oil in his robe, and continued to worry; the mother wrapped the cloth scrap around her infant, and gently shifted him to her other breast. And no one else stopped by the doorway that day after the birth. Yes, just another poor mother in another doorway. It mattered not.

It would take decades and centuries and millennia for the midrash of the ages to glorify the story into something more regal in the world’s eyes: the companions in the alleyway would become beatific angels, and the passersby would become heavenly choirs, and the kindly, caring poor would become rich kings following a star. But unchanged—unchangeable—would be the message that this particular infant would offer forever: “As in me, the Christ is birthed in you; as you love God with all your heart and soul and strength, always know that the Christ is birthed in your neighbor, too.”

And so we huddle in our doorway together on a wintry, sacred night. And so we share that crust of bread in remembrance. And so we anoint each other from that vial of common oil. And so we wrap each other in that tattered scrap of cloth. And so, perhaps, we awake—at least on this annual morn—to what our life is really, finally all about.

SANCTUARY

[from Late Latin *sanctuarium*, consecrated place]

For the past two years—after six years on these specific streets—we have talked in Community about a ministry of presence and support for “the least” of those among us: children who live in the midst of need and risk...kids who struggle for respect, mentoring, friendship, and hope. We have talked of a way to create and offer to children and their mentors a place that is safe, encouraging, fun, nurturing, and supportive of a healthy development toward adulthood...a place to live, to grow, to learn, to love. We have talked and talked, done research, listened to many in the wider community, attempted to ascertain what we folks—not as “professionals”—could offer these kids. And finally, taking a risk of head and heart, we have jumped off the fence of “maybe” into the woods of “yes.”

Starting months ago, we have founded a place of beauty and serenity and hope. We have named it “Sanctuary,” a place that is consecrated both by the hard work of creating it, as well as the hope of beckoning possibility.

We found twelve wooded acres, including a pretty beat-up brick house, lying only six miles from St. Dismas House. We have cut trees, dragged off piles and mounds of imbedded trash and debris; we have transformed the main house (which shall be called Grace House) into a space of light and comfort, a place for residency, guests, and special events; we have accomplished the huge project of erecting the activities building (which shall be called Hosanna House), a place for programs, retreats, Gatherings, relaxation, groups, events, dinners...and *life*; we have added a large, in-ground “sports pool” in which both adults and kids can release energy and develop community; we have received gifts of heat/air systems, gifts of endless hours of backbreaking labor by all sorts of good folks, gifts of money to keep the dream alive; we continue to add playgrounds, a camp ground, and assorted amenities.

It’s hard to believe that it’s been happening; it’s humbling to realize that folks here and around the country have donated the \$43,000 for improvements.

In all of the exuberance of accomplishment and possibilities, we have been reminded, too, that our “outcast” image prevails, at least in some quarters. We have gone to various child-protection and child-care agencies, inviting them to offer our new facilities to children and families, free-of-charge, so that the entire community can benefit from this place of tranquility. After polite-but-questioning receptions, not a word has come back from any of the agencies...not a word of affirmation or participation or communication. After a somewhat paranoid reaction, I have to realize—in the light of so many previous experiences—that we will need to go to “the streets” ourselves to welcome “the least.” Thank God for that reminder.

This week—amid more labor and planning—Sanctuary became the temporary home for a young woman we love, the daughter of a mother with AIDS; next week, a group of kids will be coming for a swimming party; next month we will host the regional brain-injury group, as well as a retreat...and then a huge picnic for county employees and their families...a large Community wedding is planned, as well as a commitment rite for a Gay couple...a minister asked if he could spend some days to reflect on his vocation.

And maybe there’ll be no end to the caravan of outcasts.

ELDER

[from Old English *ieldra*, authority of age and experience]

A cornerstone, of course, of Scott Peck's paradigm of community-building is that of *diversity*. In this modern world, I think, we tend to think of that word in terms of race and gender and class and politics...rarely, unfortunately, in terms of age. In our biases of youth and speed, we often ignore or cast aside those who are "elderly," forgetting—to our soul's despair—the respect offered to elders for the past 10,000 years...and conveniently denying, too, that we all age with each passing day...or simply fearing that reality.

Into our own circle of community, then, marched John.

Although we had known him slightly, for several years, through occasional preaching invitations at the Unity Church, he showed up (along with Margaret, his love and wife for *six decades*) at St. Dismas House about 18 months ago, announcing that he (or they) wished to teach a course to the denizens of this Community. He wasn't exactly sure what the course would be, but he suggested that it would entail some of his learnings from Unity, as well as tidbits of wisdom from his almost-nine decades. So I arrogantly said no: we didn't want him (or them) to teach a course right then...but we would *love* to have them become members of the circle of friends who sat together twice a week—every week—to share their lives, their struggles, their hopes.

Well, John was somewhat incredulous that he would be of any "help" to folks by just sitting in a circle...but he (and they) agreed to try it. And try it they did! Virtually every time we gathered, there would be John...sometimes hobbling his way through Mass and dinner and Sharing Group, sometimes holding forth with endless aphorisms or occasional wisdom he had gathered since 1909. And somewhere along the line, he and she "got it": they began to realize that we wanted—and cherished—simply their presence...to sit with us; to share their stages of living; to tell us of different times and places, as well as the present; to be our brother-sister, father-mother, grandfather-grandmother, and whatever else was beckoned; to kiss and hold each other's hand in our presence; to occasionally be cantankerous and moody (like the rest of us!); to allow the gleam in their eyes to dazzle a whole room; to just keep coming back and coming back.

And so they did—including John's 90th birthday party (when the "wisdom" he offered was, "Always try to keep things open at *both* ends!"), including the restatement of their wedding vows in the St. Dismas Chapel on their 60th anniversary, and on through John's operations and illnesses and spectacular recoveries. Moment after moment, they simply kept eldering us.

And then John went into the hospital again, and we knew that things were terribly serious. Family arrived from near and far; we held vigil over several nights. On Saturday, as he had his last alert and frisky day, he asked again to be baptized, and so we did...giving him the spiritual name of Isaiah ("Here am I, Lord, here am I")...and watched his smile, kissed his cheek, told him how very much we loved him.

At seven in the morning, with lots of folks touching him in his peaceful sleep, his

breathing simply stopped, and Margaret uttered the words so perfectly said for each and all of us: “Oh, my....” We wept, yet gave thanks for a good death. We joined in a Requiem Eucharist attended by endless friends and Companions. We imagined—through all of it—John Isaiah slowly walking to the front of the Chapel to receive the Body of the Christ who lived within him...ah, and yes, we knew that we weren’t imagining at all: John continues to walk and sit among us, fathering and grand-fathering and befriending us forevermore. Margaret drives her car, through darkness sometimes, to virtually every circle we form in that living room John loved so much, to mother and grandmother us to our souls’ delight, to offer us “kids” a billet-doux of age and experience.

Oh, my....

CAUSE

[from Latin *causa*, reason for condition or action]

I had driven the thirty-odd miles to deliver some boxes of food to this family we had known—and supported financially and emotionally—for years, a family which had experienced some of the more virulent sufferings of America’s current landscape: we had held vigil and then buried two female members of the family—both from the epidemic of AIDS; the mother of this household is also infected, yet reasonably healthy, as is one of the many children...children who are bright and joyful and eager, even as they live in this dilapidated house in this poverty-struck rural community. With extended-family children included, the house (shack?) is normally filled with nine kids and two parents.

The children always want to get *close* to me and other Community members—perhaps they remember too well, at their still-young ages, what we’ve all been through together—and so they always cluster around me on such visits, wanting to touch, to play, to ask questions, to tell of recent achievements in school.

It was in such a Pied-Piper-procession that some of them joined me in a walk around the house...and it was with a sense of shock that I suddenly stopped the parade, pointing at some collected water below a bedroom window. I knew what it was, and, certainly, they knew what it was. I asked them how long this pool of sewage had been visible. “Oh, I guess about three weeks,” the oldest offered with a serious smile. It was in that moment—in what seemed like a millisecond—that I knew that enough was enough, that the work and focus of this Community for the next several months was now defined and absolute.

Within hours, I was on the phone, not only to Community and Board members, but also to a friend who did septic work. Planning and discussion meetings proceeded; debates over whether to tear down the building and replace it with a large “double-wide,” or try to totally rehab the present structure; vital questions about how on earth we were going to beg for approximately \$40,000 in materials and skills. As usual, we paraphrased among ourselves the defining quotation within our Community, “If you do beautiful work, the support will come”—and we decide to rebuild the falling structure, to respect the integrity of the site known as home to these kids.

In these past six months, we have put thousands of miles on our old pick-ups and vans, traveling those thirty-odd-miles-each-way, pretty much on a daily basis: tearing off siding and sheetrock and roof; replacing all plumbing and electrical wiring; installing a heat/air system; creating more bedrooms and baths to accommodate growing kids in a bright and safe environment. Even as we tired from the daily grind, the kids would arrive home from school, en masse, to act as cheerleaders to our sometimes-wavering spirits. As we remembered the long struggle of this creation, it occurred to us that this site was meant to be a part of our Community for a very long time—as we watch the children grow and blossom—and we decided, too, that this shining new addition to our life could be named only one righteous name: St. Jude House, in celebration of the legendary “patron-saint of lost causes,” as St. Jude reminds us that no cause is lost if it is won through the solidarity of its supporters and workers.

So, on this lovely June day, twenty-five of us traveled to St. Jude House to plant fifty bushes—a “finishing touch”—to clean up the vestiges of construction work, to join in the wondrous experience of blessing the home, amid all the children and the parents.

The oldest boy carried the candle as we processed from the front door, room to room, offering a special prayer for each of these glimmering, new spaces (and with children “whispering” loudly, “This is MY room!”); we ended up in the living room, where the residents—parents and children—recited the words from our *Prayer Book*, “May the friend or stranger be always welcomed as the Christ”...and then we shared Communion, remembering especially those in the family and the Community who had died of AIDS, while offering thanks for those—both near and far—who continue to live and grow. It has been a day of laughter and tears, of construction war-stories and silly, kid tales...but mainly it has been months—and a day—of looking into the wondrous eyes of these St. Jude denizens, seeing the signs of a dream, truly, come true.

Now, of course, we simply need to beg for the last \$16,000 of debt. But as the song says, “Hey Jude, don’t be afraid....”

FRAY

[from Middle English *fraien*, protracted struggle]

In all these years of experiencing people coming and going—some by death, some by disillusionment in their own journey, some by disillusionment in our life together—I marvel, again, at the courage and resolve of those who keep “showing up,” of those who are determined to put up with the struggle, with the ups and downs, with the imperfections in each other...with me.

A good person wrote to me not long ago:

While I certainly have many occasions when I share your longings to “take a break from community”—when I feel like things aren’t going well or in the “right” direction or in the process we committed to—I have to remind myself (at least once a week!) that “taking a break from community” is the very antithesis of community-building...and therefore, in those moments at least, I become a non-believer in the process. I’ve never heard of or experienced a true community of human beings which was not constantly in the throes of chaos, struggle, anger, disappointment, debate, ego—along with joy, celebration, laughter, mutual support, fellowship, forgiveness, etc. What a gift...when we determine to stay in the fray!

And now that person has decided—for reasons truly unknown to me—to leave the “fray.”

And then—when I’m not being objective enough about myself or not tolerant enough of my limitations or, conversely, too arrogant about my ability to be all things to all people—I take it all inside...wondering how I somehow didn’t do it “right.” That’s when I’m truly nuts.

Now I must re-convince myself that this person made their own decision on their own terms...and I don’t have to like it to accept it.

Now I must look around the circle of Companions to remind myself of how strong our “frayed, tattered cloth of community” really is...and wrap ourselves again in its healing warmth.

SENSE

[from Latin *sensus*, to perceive]

Even as we continue the risk and vagaries of staying in the “fray,” a lovely woman—Laurie Davies, Religion Editor of the *Tyler Morning Telegraph*—takes the risk herself, attending a couple of our Sharing Groups, not only as a reporter, but as a group participant. The article she publishes about St. Dismas Community life—and specifically her “Sharing Group” experience—reminds us that we need such observation; we appreciated her presence, her willingness to look at real life, her sense of humor, her sharp perceptions, her good heart, and her words:

It’s group night at St. Dismas House—and I’m wishing I hadn’t come. I’m the newcomer, guaranteed to be put on the spot. It’s been a full day at work—time to put the job aside. Besides, I’m not big on touchy-feely-group-sharing-stuff.

But I take my seat at the end of a well-worn wrap-around couch.

Seventeen others, nine men and eight women, sit down.

AIDS, alcoholism, drug addiction, poor health and poverty have ravaged their respective paths through the lives of those in the room. The aftermath spills out all over the place during Wednesday and Sunday group sessions.

Indeed, the ‘saint’ after whom the home is named was, according to the *Catholic Apocryphal Book of Nicodemus*, one of the thieves that hung with Christ at Calvary.

It’s a rag tag group, this Order of Christian Workers. One could be the guy on the corner holding a sign, ‘Will work for food.’ Another just confessed to her adolescent son she is gay.

They’re not there to be fixed, converted or controlled. They hold no common doctrine. They have no official affiliation with anyone.

Kind of like their Abbot.

The Rev. Tom Jackson’s formal vestments include a short-sleeve black shirt, white priest’s collar, blue jeans and black Cowboy boots. His theology has Episcopal roots with unconventional leanings. The blessing he most often invokes is ‘May you stay out of jail.’ He’s high on rituals, low on rigidity.

He’s a maverick minister—a self-confessed screwball who used to read the Gospels as an Episcopal priest and tell the world what they meant.

‘Now I go and look at the world and then go back to the Gospels and say, “Oh, yeah, that’s what it meant.”’

He opens ‘group,’ prodding for first sentences—mandatory statements from each person about anything. Similarly, the night ends with last sentences. What happens in between is anybody’s guess.

Sometimes it’s profound. Sometimes it’s profane.

On this Wednesday night—partly for my benefit—all are asked to answer the question: Why do you come?

Some come for a feeling of family, others for the depth of safety. Mass, which precedes the group meetings, is also a draw for those seeking some

kind of spiritual something.

One admitted he comes because he has to—attendance is a requirement for those who live in the community.

Then it's my turn.

'I pretty much spent all day scared to come,' I offer.

'Of us?' This was the incredulous reply of an elderly widow seated next to me.

In this group, questions are more important than answers, acceptance more important than agreement.

One woman brought her grown son with her the first time to make sure the Order was not really a cult. Such talk fresh on the tip of his tongue, a guy named John piped up behind me as I rose to leave: 'Next time you come, bring a live chicken.'

When Jackson bought the home at 1601 N. Bois d'Arc in April 1993, David Koresh and the Branch Davidian disaster were in the news.

He worried people would think he was starting a cult.

What he really wanted to start was a community.

'I yelled outside to absolutely no one: "Here we are." And there was no "we." It was just me.'

That soon changed. Jackson learned of an AIDS patient who needed a place to stay. And the St. Dismas AIDS ministry was born.

AIDS patients came in droves to live at St. Dismas. Then, at the rate of four to six a month, they died. Jackson refers to those mid-'90s days as the 'days of death.'

Undeterred, he bought seven more homes and established his Order of Christian Workers as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Now no longer exclusively an AIDS ministry, the Order is a recovery haven for people suffering from bad health, bad circumstances, or bad choices.

Jackson requires very little in return for housing, utilities and community: Get into a 12-step program. Get a job if you can, volunteer if you can't.

And get yourself to Mass and group every Wednesday and Sunday.

Round two.

I did go back—and I left the ritual sacrifice behind. But as Jackson reintroduced me as a pro-Communist, labor union organizer, the absence of a live chicken was lost to laughter at his obvious overestimation of any latent liberal leanings.

This night, a Sunday, was completely different. A few personal, very pointed statements to others. A little bit of tap dancing around the person or idea of God. A lot of concern for three troubled sons—sons the community feels beholden to raise together.

And a lot of grappling over people who come—and then choose to leave. I'm glad I went. Not because I agree that questions are more important than answers.

I'm glad I went because now I know more about St. Dismas than I did before. I'm glad I went because I need to know the world isn't defined by the people neatly tucked into my social, familial, spiritual and professional

circle. Mostly, I'm glad I went because of a statement from Jackson that has been reverberating in my mind: 'These people are no different than people in south Tyler or anyone else. We're all trying to make sense out of nonsense.'

GRATITUDE

[from Latin *gratus*, pleasing, thankful]

A letter sent to our newsletter, from our Companion Elise, adds a more specific note, perhaps, to “making sense out of nonsense”:

About two years ago, I went to an O.C.W. “Gathering” at the Unity Church in Birmingham, Alabama. I had been invited to that event by a good friend of mine, Sr. Andrea Margaret. Little did I know at the time that it was a life-changing event. Fr. Tom and Sr. Maria facilitated the Gathering, and they told the group about the Community they lived in. I remember thinking at that time, “What a cool idea—a spiritual group living life together!”

Life went on for me as usual for a while after that, until I found myself in a position of needing a big life change. My friend Andrea recommended to me that I go to Texas and live with the Community. I knew when she mentioned it that it was the place I needed to be.

I left Birmingham immediately and drove to Tyler, not really knowing what I was running to. However, once there, I was given a place to stay temporarily, and then told to find a job, which I did.

It is now almost two years later, and—although I no longer live in the Community, but remain an active part of it—it has given me a foundation I never dreamed possible.

I now feel it necessary to go out and help others who want my help and are willing to help themselves.

I say thank you, for giving me back my life. I am forever grateful.

I immediately think of Meister Eckhart’s line, “If the only prayer you ever say is ‘Thank you,’ that will suffice.” We’re always praying for *something*...and I wonder how often we remember that which suffices all that we already have.

FEAR

[akin to Latin *periculum*, attempt, peril]

An unexpected letter arrives:

I pray my letter finds you well. This letter is an attempt to clear away the debris I've created—that stands in the way of my usefulness to others. I write out of respect that my presence may cause greater harm.

I would like to begin with the last group I attended. My attitude entering group was one of defiance, fear, and a total disrespect for you. I was angry and hateful, and I came for one reason and one reason only: to do as much damage as I could with the time I had, and justify myself as the victim upon leaving. There was in my attitude a total disregard of you and of all Community members present. My agenda was to spew out as much venom as possible and get out. Upon reflection, I wish I had stopped there; however, I did not. I took whatever information we held in private and used it as someone would use a sword. I did everything within my vicious power to harm you.

I am happy to say that there has not been a day that I have not reaped the 'rewards' of my actions. I've assassinated your character with every opportunity presented to me. I write this not in hopes of forgiveness, but to make myself accountable for my part. You have spent a lot of time and energy on my spiritual development—and I took it for granted. However, all was not lost. I write this letter in as humble a spirit as I can muster, and ask, 'What can I do to set right the wrong?'

Tom, I'm not asking that you place my wrongdoings aside, but rather that you hear me out, and that you open yourself up to the next few lines written.

You have been instrumental in my healing and growth, and I will always hold a special place in my heart for you. My actions in the past year have proved opposite of what I now write; however, I pray that, from this day forward, only the good that I know to be 'Tom Jackson' is what I'll carry. Thank you, Tom, for everything. May God keep you whole and safe.

I respond:

First, thank you for your open disclosure of your personal reflections on your motives and actions...regarding me and the larger Community. On a moral and spiritual basis, of course, none of that is mine to judge or evaluate, knowing that I can simply receive it, reflect personally on it, and realize that forgiveness and/or 'making it right' have not been issues of question for me.

Secondly, I am pleased that you perceive that sense of personal and spiritual growth from our times of sitting together, and I pray now, as I have in these past many months, that your life will continue to blossom and flourish in a sense of deeper spiritual intimacy and solidarity with those in your world.

Lastly, let me restate what I have affirmed: you offered a lot of help, talent, hard work and commitment during your days in this Community,

and I know that you will gift your future communities with those same assets, resolving fears into acts of even greater good.

With thanks and prayers of encouragement, I offer that blessing which each and all of us seek in our own fears and hopes: Go in peace....

Go in peace, I say to myself. Celebrate what we had. Let it go. Let it go. Look around you at the gifts. Let it go. Be thankful for the before and the now. Remember what is enough. Be thankful for *all* of it...the pain and the peace...don't regret *any* of it...it's *all* a gift. Go in peace, self.

JUSTICE

[from Latin *justitia*, equity]

“Go in peace” continues to bang through my head and heart, and I’m reminded that I’m not alone in the struggle, as Sr. Cindy offers some words for the newsletter:

“Go in peace, seeking justice.’ So ends the Mass each Sunday. And each time we speak those words in enthusiastic unison, I feel this little uncomfortable twinge of guilt...wondering if I am, and what the *cost* might be.

Seeking justice is hard work! Seeking justice does not make one popular! Seeking justice can be very upsetting, non-profitable, and even might get me killed! So I go through my days, rarely seeking justice, but trying to put temporary ‘fixes’ on some of the endless *results* of injustice. Yes, it’s balm for my guilt, yet I tell myself that something is better than nothing in that justice-seeking. Or are my band-aids really *justice-seeking*?

I start with a head-on effort at helping with the Back-to-School situation of so many kids in our poverty-torn neighborhood. When I was a child, it was always so exciting to shop for school clothes, and even more exciting to shop for school supplies. The fresh notebooks! The pencils and colored pens! So when a social worker asked me to help obtain same for some families that couldn’t afford these items, I was glad to say *yes*.

Many of these children now attend a school that requires uniforms, and therefore I thought the process would be easy, given that navy or khaki pants, skirts, and white shirts wouldn’t demand an excess of either choice or funds. I go to three major stores, only to find that the prices on these items are ‘temporarily’ higher in late August (suddenly, ‘supply-side economics’ is no longer a vague theory), and somehow the inventory is in short supply! I do not go to complain to the store managers, I do not write an angry letter to the president of the companies. I just pay what I have to...and leave.

On to school supplies. For weeks, I’ve watched commercials on television about a local cable company helping to provide school supplies for needy children. I think—as I’m sure many other viewers think—well, at least this problem is solved. But then I try to access those supplies for the kids, and I discover that, no, the company is not supplying school supplies; it is ‘coordinating’ the distribution of supplies donated by the public. This was certainly not clear in the advertisements, and, of course, there are no school supplies.

So I get the list of *required* supplies and begin to shop. As I am inherently a bargain-shopper, I go to the most generic of stores, searching for sales and good deals. I discover quickly, even in these supposed bastions of low prices, that the cost of supplies for two kids is \$50.00! I immediately think about a parent working full-time at a minimum-wage job, knowing that the requirements for those two kids would demand over a *quarter* of the parent’s weekly salary. Food, rent, transportation, school supplies: take your pick, mom. I do not write to the school board or the cable

company or the newspaper. I allow the cashier to ring up the purchases, and I deliver them to children.

Perhaps I am writing all of this down only to share frustration with my country which allows—in its immense wealth—to have children living in poverty. Or perhaps this will be a beginning of something in my heart and soul, even something as basic as the injustice in the simple things of school clothes and school supplies. They seem such ‘safe’ subjects—and I am not a person of great courage—but perhaps this will allow me yet another opportunity to WAKE UP.

If nothing else, I now know better that acts of charity—while good for my soul and reminders of the Christ in each of us—are not an answer to injustice. Acts of charity are acts of charity: love, connection, immediacy. Acts of justice—seeking justice—are about something else: seeking and effecting fundamental change in the very way we live and breathe and share as persons, as society, as world. That’s why it’s so dangerous. We need both, of course; yet we risk losing both if we dare confuse them. Jesus said, ‘You will do things greater than I do.’ Gandhi said, ‘My life is my message.’ I say back to each of them, ‘Help me to wake up; please give me courage.’

“Go in peace, seeking justice....”

AUDIT

[from Latin *auditus*, act of hearing]

We have experienced the five-year-audit by the Internal Revenue Service, that review of “compliance” for charitable organizations, that close-up look that confirms—or not—that we are doing what we say we are doing. The multi-day examination was fairly exhaustive—ending with a “good audit” designation—and we are back at work, glad it is over. Yet, it was a helpful process, in forcing us to look anew at what we actually do every day; in fact, we were asked to list our more “typical” daily activities...and suddenly we remembered why we’re tired a lot:

Taking trucks to the Food Bank to get hundreds of pounds of food and then stocking it in our Food Pantry; meeting with a caseworker so that one of our Resident Companions can get mental health services; picking up used baby and children’s clothing at yard sales and then sorting, washing, and stocking them in our Clothing Pantry; leading or attending a funeral; buying someone gas or a new tire so they can get to work; delivering food boxes to various clinics (Women’s, Pediatrics, AIDS) and individuals; interviewing a family which seeks housing in our Community homes; speaking to a civic or religious group about the needs of the poor in our area; being present at the hospital while a mother delivers her first baby; replacing a toilet or a door or a roof on someone’s house; listening to an alcoholic or drug addict struggle through the possibility of recovery; visiting an older Community member who is in a nursing home; putting together our monthly newsletter; supervising a bunch of kids at the swimming pool; celebrating Communion in the Chapel; attending someone’s court trial; re-painting one of our apartments for new Resident Companions; worrying about due bills; leading a weekend retreat in a large, suburban parish; attending Sharing Group, as Companions struggle through their life experiences; mowing lawns, trimming bushes, raking leaves; telling someone they have to leave Community housing because of drug/alcohol use; having a big birthday party for a kid—or an adult—who’s never really had one; making calls in the year-long process of preparing the Annual Children’s Christmas Party; talking with the family of an AIDS patient; sharing office duties and chores; leading the “exercise program” at the nursing home; helping someone find a job; preparing a Community supper; preaching at a local church; cleaning St. Dismas House.

And, of course, begging.

AWAKE

[from Old English *awacan*, to become conscious or aware]

Folks in the Community have—over the years—asked me what I mean about my emphasis on *Wake Up!* Too often, I think, I come up with some bloated intellectual, part-Buddhist, part-Gospel response that leaves them even more confused.

But Grace brought us a good example recently.

In the Mass, we ring a bell at a few points: the opening of the liturgy, before the reading of the Gospel, the blessing of the bread, the blessing of the cup—each and all bell strikes as a possible means of getting our attention to “Hey, this next thing is something we might want to *really* pay attention to!”

Well, for some reason the bell was missing at the Mass.

So, I said, “Okay, no bell. Instead, at every point that we usually ring the bell, let’s just shout out together, ‘WAKE UP!’”

We did...and we did.

ENLIGHTENMENT

[derived from Old English *en* + *leoht*, inner light]

We continue to receive quite a few letters from inmates of the state prisons—almost always males—who are asking for contributions to their inmate-fund, or simply seeking someone to write back to them. While our finances don't allow too many contributions, the letters keep coming, and occasionally one arrives which is seemingly asking for response rather than financial charity. One arrived a couple of weeks ago, and, after reading it, I decided that Sr. Cindy might want to respond. She did...and then shared it with me:

Dear Jim,

It has taken me awhile to respond to your letter because I was so moved and kept wanting to think about it and mull it around in my head. I'll confess to you that I also struggled with wanting to write the 'perfect' response. I know that there is no perfect or right response. I can only share who I am and my own experience of God with you, and hope that is enough.

First let me tell you that we (The Order of Christian Workers) will keep you in our prayers. We try to remember all prisoners and also those who struggle with AIDS. I hope you have been given a new drug therapy that is helping. Unfortunately I think people think the AIDS crisis is over, and don't realize that people are still getting sick or suffering from all the side effects of all the drugs.

Not knowing you—not knowing your story—makes it a little difficult to respond to the points you brought up in your letter, but several things really stood out that I'd like to comment on. When you described turning to God in a time of great need and physically feeling His Spirit and hearing His words, I knew just what you were describing. I call it Grace. Sometimes in a person's life, they will have this experience—need this experience—and I give thanks that it comes. However, my own experience (and that of even the people I look to for my spiritual guidance) is that we cannot sustain that feeling. I can't explain it, but I am suspect of those who claim to keep it, and I only know that after that 'gift,' we must find our own way.

In our liturgy, we speak of 'Christ in the Stranger's Guise.' We may not be able to directly experience GOD as we imagine Him, but if we look at the seat next to us (perhaps the cell next to you) we can find the Christ. There is a book that came out recently called *After Enlightenment, Then the Laundry*. In many ways, I think that says it all. We are moved at some point in our lives, or through a series of events, to know God. To continue to seek that feeling is a bit like chasing that first high (as with drugs or sex or whatever our addiction is). The reality for most of us humans is that after that (whatever it looks like), it is the daily stuff—the chores, our work, or just trying to stay alive with HIV in a Texas prison—that defines our relationship with God.

Something else that came up for me as I read what you wrote was a quote

I recently saw from Oscar Romero. Romero was an Archbishop in the Catholic Church and was killed in San Salvador for speaking for the poor and oppressed. This wonderful priest said, 'God exists, and he exists even more, the farther you feel from him. God is closer to you when you think he is farther away and doesn't hear you. When you feel the anguished desire for God to come near because you don't feel him present, then God is very close to your anguish.'

You wrote, 'So many people have told me I've lived my life wrong and I can't truly have God in my life of living in sin ...and that there are only so many times God will try to pull you into His fold before turning His back on you.'

Oh, hogwash! Let me quote something from the Gospel. We read in Matthew 18, 'Peter came to Him and said, "Rabbi, how often should I forgive someone who wrongs me? Seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I say to you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times."'

Keeping in mind that this was written at a time that didn't have our mathematical skills and theories, I think Jesus was saying basically to forgive an *infinite* amount of times. Now ask yourself if God would ask you to be more forgiving than He would be? I like to think of God as One who woos us like we were in a great romance...He seeks us as much as we seek Him. I don't know if this is true, I don't think we can truly 'know' God, but as a human, I must give God human characteristics in order to comprehend Him.

As for the 'sin' you referred to as living as a homosexual...Jim, just honestly ask yourself if you could live any other way. That is who you are, or a part of who you are, and to deny that would be to deny your very being. I can't undo years of the programming society has done to make you feel guilty for your sexuality with a few sentences. I suspect that in your heart you know they are wrong. Perhaps what you are struggling with is how to be who you are and still be part of the 'Christian family.' Do not let them (whoever they are) define your spirituality. While we hope to find fellow travelers to walk with, ultimately it is our own individual journey to God. There are others out there who are not as afraid and will open themselves to all the endless faces of humanity. I think those who want to exclude homosexuals from God's family are the same who would have claimed Black people didn't have souls 200 years ago. Again, I know I can't give you the magic words to 'fix' this, but I trust you will find your way on that particular issue.

You spoke of a wayward life and hurting those who loved and cared for you. I can only say that when I have done hurtful things (the only 'sin' in my opinion), all I can do is take responsibility for those actions, ask myself why I did them, and hopefully not repeat them. While I believe forgiveness is always available, I do think a little remorse (I said a little, not obsessive!) helps point out to us where we might change. I fell short of the kind of person I'd like to be a hundred times yesterday. This morning I can only pray I fall short 99 times.

Jim, you are in our prayers and hearts. I pray you find peace.
I'll close with one more Romero quote: 'Human beings are God's other
self.'
Just be human, Jim!

FERVOR

[from Latin *fervere*, intensity of feeling]

Amid the devastation and grieving of the calamities of September 11, there has been an obvious flourishing of patriotic fervor, a natural desire to unite as a nation against foes real or imagined, a passion to emphasize what is good and noble about the people and institutions of what we now refer to as the “homeland.”

We have also been exhorted by political leaders to support our fellow-citizens economically, although we all seem to struggle with exactly what can be done beyond the advice to “go out and spend money;” in the chaos of cataclysmic ordeal, it is difficult to decide or to know what is called for economically, politically, spiritually, personally. In the throws of uncertainty, we all try to do our best.

Yet, we are called—when we identify ourselves as “Christians”—to continue to live out the beckoning and demands of the Gospel...an always difficult task, a struggle in even the “best” of times, an especially daunting journey in the scope of social disaster. It seems that in the shadows of our present reunion as a people united, there are certain whispers of warning...that perhaps the struggles of our society, pre-September 11, should somehow be ignored or quieted, lest we look “unpatriotic” or not worthily lamenting our national loss.

But the Gospel continues to be read daily in homes and churches, asking us to remain true to the calling of discipleship...to give thanks for our blessings as individuals *and* as citizens...yet continually aware—and servants of—what the Christ called “the least of these.”

In my homily at the Chapel of the Culver Academies in Indiana, a month after 9/11, I mentioned the story of a little girl who had been raised by very loving parents, parents who reminded her daily of God’s love for her, of God’s protection of her, of God’s presence in her life. She often smiled or nodded or repeated her parents’ words to acknowledge that she understood.

One night, during a very strong thunderstorm, her parents realized that she had crawled into their bed, lying between them, touching both of them. Her mother quickly reminded the small girl that God loved her and protected her. And the child replied passionately, “But right now I need God with some *skin* on!”

And so our voices and work and ministry must remain vibrant. The awe-full events of 9/11 must be grieved and addressed...yet we must, I believe, be those—like others—with “skin on” in facing the issues of our lives which provide other, continuing horrors: that millions of children—in *this* country, in our own community, and in “enemy” countries—are still hungry; that millions continue to live in abject poverty; that hundreds of thousands are unemployed; that drunk driving and handguns kill ten-fold—yearly—the number of our dear brothers and sisters who perished on 9/11; that war—whether “just” or not—brought death to 62,000,000 civilians and 43,000,000 military personnel in the 20th Century; that a recent Secretary of State noted that the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children would be “worth it” in order to bring down Saddam Hussein.

We will, I hope, continue to do the work and ministry for which we are called by the Nazarene: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, be with the sick and dying, offer hope to the hopeless, beckon the children to our lives, spiritually confront the “Caesars” of the world and the homeland, act humbly, speak the truth of the Gospel, stand with the

powerless, and live in the solidarity of righteousness. Difficult intentions, as I said, in even the best of times. But we are called—first and finally—to the *real*, daily implications of the Cross. There will be some fellow-citizens, I assume, who will wish to shame or silence us in these endeavors; I hope that we will encourage each other, therefore, to not only fulfill our citizenship, but to remain steadfast in our declaration—and our discipleship—of the Gospel.

I recently came across a quotation—the words of Bertolt Brecht—offered in a different time, but in similar circumstances:

In the dark times
Will there be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.

It is ours now to decide: what will be our song of the dark times?

I pray—even as we dialogue and gather and work and minister, even as we share common tables on Thanksgiving and the holydays—that our song will be one of thanks for our blessings...and resolve for our spiritual integrity.

May peace—in all of its endless possibilities—be in our heart and life...especially when peace is *difficult* to find in our heart and life.

NOSTALGIA

[akin to Greek *neisthai*, to return;
Old English *genesan*, to survive]

Sr. Maria and I are back at Sanctuary—home—after a somewhat Odyssean journey...six months in length, multiple subcultures in breadth. It all started with a blurt.

A couple of years ago, in a very casual, lighthearted conversation about the this-and-that's of life, I said, offhandedly, "Well, you know, when I die, I want to be buried in Culver, Indiana." Hmm. Although she had heard me refer often to my history on the campus of the prep school in that rural setting, she wanted to hear more of my reasoning about the burial site.

"Makes sense to me. The first place where I got an adolescent sense of my self. First place where I began to make some sense out of nonsense. First place where I picked up a 'rhythm' of living. First place where I felt I was actually accomplishing something...all that adolescent, growing-up stuff, I know...but also a place that my parents loved and enjoyed—in essence, I guess, where I first got to really know them as people instead of only parents...or maybe the fuller definition of parents." I continued, I'm sure, with a soliloquy of memories that only a patient and kind spouse could endure, and ended with, "And, with my familial roots around Detroit being pretty withered, it just seems to be the place to be buried."

In her usual enthusiasm, she offered her own blurt: "Then let's go sometime and take a look!"

And we did. It had been too long since we had been anywhere outside of East Texas, away from the 24/7 of our work and ministry...and we needed some rejuvenation. So off to the Elysian (and corn) fields of northern Indiana: to rest, to walk the gorgeous shoreline of Lake Maxinkuckee on the campus boundary, to see the changes in life there after twenty-five years of girls being added to the once all-male military school, of feeling the ghosts of long-gone mentors, of feeling that lightness of sudden irresponsibility and utter relaxation. It seemed infectious...and we resolved to return several months later, if only to rejuvenate anew.

The second visit came at a time of intense emotional stress in our home Community, a time of day-and-night, gut-wrenching struggle with what we believed to be the "discipline" of life, the boundaries of behavior for both adults and adolescents, the most ultimately nurturing and/or positive roles of mentors/Companions...good God, there had barely been a moment's relief in the multi-passioned bouts of point-counterpoint, of dear relationships frayed and fearful, of desperately trying to find—if not consensus—at least a calming truce in a large-family argument about—ironically—what "to love" really meant. Irritated, exhausted, frustrated, we returned to that place of previous calm, allowing the Midwestern ambiance to work its balm into our wounds.

After attending the campus chapel service on Sunday, we met the Chaplain, Tom Steffen, and his wife Juli, outside the cathedral-like building, and had a pleasant, casual conversation, not realizing that this chance meeting would, later, develop into long conversations between this Methodist campus pastor and this recently-madman priest from the streets. Maria and I proceeded to use the next several days to find or renew our damaged equilibrium, and—in the always-bizarre realm of our so-called equilibrium—we

found and bought a small house in that village... a house that had been burned-out ten years before, that sat forlorn and blackened by an accident of a decade before, that beckoned us to repair and rebuild... and, of course, a house that presented the metaphor of what our Community had been feeling for the past month or two. In the scheme of things, as they say, this made no sense whatsoever—this burned-out, pathetic structure that sat a thousand miles from our heart-home... yet we felt, perhaps, that—for once—we needed to make some nonsense out of the sense. Ironically or not, we named this injured property ChristHouse.

Over the next several months, occasional visits to Culver brought deeper conversations with the Chaplain—commiserating, laughing, comparing and contrasting life experiences, biases, losses, small victories. The treks also brought the seductive, invigorating soothing of small-town pleasantries: our across-the-side-street-neighbors, Mike and Lori, who offered everything from hospitality to plumbing repair to fresh-baked cinnamon buns; the old man, who lives behind ChristHouse, promising to fatten us up with one of the 100 pies he bakes each week; the folks who congregate at Cafe Max (two blocks away, in the heart of town) each morning, who give me a sober nod or a welcoming smile... some of them looking at my tattered work clothes and asking, “You’re the new *priest* in town?”; folks who are, I suppose, no different than folks in Tyler, Texas... except, perhaps, with fewer cowboy belt-buckles.

In the middle of one conversation with Tom Steffen, he suddenly brought up the idea of me coming to Culver for the summer and/or fall... to “chaplain,” to teach, to be present, to perhaps connect town-n-gown, to be Chaplain to the Community, as it were. The idea both astonished and intrigued me and us, and beyond the immediate fantasies of presence and details, one of my first thoughts was simply, “I wonder if there might be some real growth in the St. Dismas Community if Maria and I were gone for awhile.” And so I/we presented those ruminations to the Servant-Leaders and the larger Community back home... and I realized quickly what is no secret to our individual and Community lives: that change provokes our fears... but fears that can only be assuaged by living *through* them.

These past months have wrought poignant and vivid etchings to our hearts and minds: the wrenching differences—and similarities—between these subcultures of St. Dismas Community neighborhoods and the manicured campus of an ordered school; the disorganization of Community ministry compared to the endless-organizing of administrators and faculties; the spiritual meanderings of a back-alley Dismas Chapel... the steadied cadence of a campus religious service; the ambiguities of living in Community chaos and joy, vis-à-vis the daily schedule of hundreds of students; the seat-of-the-pants, consensus decision-making of the Tyler *Havurah*... the chain-of-command, processed design of academe; the tradition-as-it-happens of common experience in St. Dismas... the decades-old traditions of campus folklore; the sudden change in direction toward immediate need on the streets... the steady change-of-course of the institutional ship.

I have loved the immersion in the same-different environments of these two places. I have loved the nostalgic yearnings for St. Dismas—for my friends and Companions and chaos... as well as the nostalgic beckoning of Culver—for my past, my new relationships, my struggles with institutions. I have loved bringing some new ideas, perhaps, to that sylvan setting, even as I’ve loved returning to the streets of those ideas. I

have loved watching students animate a new concept in the classroom, just as I love watching a recovering drunk celebrate the Eucharist in our makeshift sanctuary. I have loved tweaking rock-hard, immovable fundamentalists in *both* places, just as they have somehow loved monitoring my boundaries. I have loved hugging and kissing-on-the-cheek both the Hispanic laborer in Tyler and the proper administrator of Culver...both, nervously, have allowed that; both have, nervously, wanted that...as I have. I have loved watching Servant-Leaders and Community members “run the show” with their own gifts and skills, even as they’ve allowed me to have “a hand in” from a thousand miles away.

Finally, of course, the arrogance of it interrupted. The arrogance of me thinking that I was beyond the real caveats of life...the warnings that “You can’t be in two places at once,” of “You can’t have it both ways,” of the very meaning of the word *arrogate* itself: “to make undue claims to having.” Finally, I knew that I couldn’t expect others to fulfill the role I had been assigned in Community...especially while those “others”—my Companions and intimates—were holding down full-time jobs, living in full-time families, ministering in full-time Community. And, finally, I realized that our nation-wide Companions and supporters were wondering where on earth we were in any given moment...and likely seeing the arrogance of it all.

And so we are back in Grace House at Sanctuary. I am now acting as a “consultant” to the Academy, expecting to “be” there for a week or so every six weeks, expecting to be in continuing contact with Tom Steffen, with students, with faculty and staff with whom strong and increasingly-trusted relationships have been forged. It doesn’t seem perfect, but it does seem whole. We know, too, that these two monumentally different/similar communities are now a part of each other in ways both obvious and subtle...and witness to that is the expected arrival, in a couple of weeks, of a crowd of students and faculty members who are traveling the thousand miles to be Volunteer Companions in the work and celebration of this year’s Annual St. Dismas Children’s Christmas Party. Witness to that, too, is the praying for each other—the caring for each other—whether in a rag-tag Chapel on North Bois d’Arc in Tyler, Texas, or in a majestic Chapel of a distant campus. As Br. Michael continuously reminds us, “the Invisible Body of Christ becomes Visible.”

Nostalgia—“to return, to survive”—remains in the hearts of *all* places of love experienced.

TRENCHES

[from Middle English *trenche*, place cut in the wooded ground]

The group—much diminished from five or six years ago—gathers on a town square on this bright December 1st noon to observe yet again the memories and the solidarity of World AIDS Day. Faces I have not seen in a while smile back at me: beckoning a hug; wanting to tell me of their latest meds and struggles and hopes; wanting to speak names of our deceased Companions, *over 100 so far*; longing to revive memories of battles won and lost, laughs laughed, tears shed, vivid moments shared; seeking—as I do—to touch and be touched, to know that relationships are still alive, to feel that love still abounds.

Someone on a distant street corner watches us, squinting in the sun, likely wondering what we're up to with our ribboned Memorial Cross, our odd combination of ages, races, and mood. I wonder what he sees that we cannot. I imagine that we look like a motley crew of tattered veterans, weary from war, dressed now in our mufti that is no different than our previous battle-gear, a dispersed and wounded battalion remembering when the cry for "Medic!" was the common plea for action and solidarity. Yes, we are all those images of then and now. I inwardly thank God for our years in the trenches.

An official declaration from the mayor is read; a hollow remembrance from the White House drones on. The microphone is open to folks who wish to share their memories and thoughts. A small group of people living with AIDS offers a brief, somber skit on the dangers of infection, and my eyes fill with tears, not from the skit but from the pride I feel in these young ones who are trying so hard to witness for life, even in their illness.

Then it's my turn at the mike, to offer an "official" prayer, plus my own "unofficial" diary of the war:

Jerry J. was very serious, but when he laughed, he laughed till he cried;
and Donnie went to his last Halloween party dressed in Fr. Tom's black shirt and white collar;
and Vera held her grandchildren in her lap;
and Mark loved being totally outrageous;
and Richard would quietly listen to all of our life stories;
and Francis didn't want us to know how painful it all was;
and Terry C. was a computer whiz masquerading as a renegade;
and George wanted to tell his life story on the Oprah Show;
and Terry P. showed people how to sing beautifully;
and Jerry R. went blind, only to see better;
and Tim simply wanted to be touched by someone;
and Bob would stand in a doorway of St. Dismas, with a warm cup of coffee and a warmer smile;
and Kim simply adored her kids;
and Mac was a kind and gentle man;
and Tommy wanted so much to be a good mate;
and Bruce didn't want to ever leave Michael;
and Keith would ride the Six Flags roller-coaster 20 times in a row;

and Howard fought against the plague like a warrior;
and Danny played softball with us, dressed in a gorgeous white tennis outfit;
and James said goodbye quietly;
and Arlene was angry as hell, not wanting to leave her child;
and Rusty became his wondrous self, before our very eyes;
and Kenny wore lots of silver bracelets;
and Carey was so excited about everything in life;
and Ed just went about his business;
and John seemed to take everyone he met straight to his heart;
and Stewart offered no welcome to Mr. Death;
and Ociel held his newborn namesake above him and cried with utter joy;
and Gene simply wanted people to love him;
and Susan wanted to be a real, live cowgirl;
and Robert just tried to be Robert;
and Saidrick said he was going to the store...returning days later, laughing in his red bandana;
and Arthur sometimes slept at night on our picnic table;
and Phyllis was determined to be the best mom she could possibly be;
and Zane loved to raise birds and animals;
and Michael brought us the magic of love and eloquence;
and Ronnie cried when he was scared;
and Isaac went away sadly;
and Joel wondered why he was loved;
and William R. was the brother you might have wished for;
and Cowboy was really a cowboy;
and Mark loved to shoot pool in our garage;
and Joe decided to let us love him;
and Jerry P. rushed about trying to make everyone okay;
and Gail just kept trying to make some sense out of the nonsense;
and David was the boy next door who tried to hide from love;
and Marion wanted to lead everyone to the Promised Land;
and Mike thought that we could all be brothers and sisters in this outrageous war.
Most knew that it was all a dance of death and Life;
and there were *so* many more—brothers and sisters, all—who gave us gifts we didn't always deserve...and memories worth a lifetime.

ADOPT

[Latin *adoptare*, to choose]

It all started sometime in the fall of that first year of St. Dismas, that first realization of how *many* HIV folks there were, of their often-destitute situations, of the family members who experienced the ravages of rejection, isolation, and poverty. Especially the kids. One conversation led to another, and the idea grew rapidly: since most of these kids are not going to have any real experience of Santa—in terms of fantasy, celebration, and gifts—let’s provide it!

In that first yuletide season, there were only a handful of kids known to us, and so we easily begged for gifts for twenty-six children, aged infant to teen. That first “St. Dismas Children’s Christmas Party” was held in the House, with cookies and punch and presents and, of course, jolly Santa handing out a present to each. Yet, beyond that single gift there were more, for we had made the important decision to respect the parents’ role, too...and so we “secretly” gave the parents additional bags of more gifts for each child, so that on Christmas morn, the parents could offer these “added” gifts, as *theirs* to the children. We discovered in this new Community tradition a further gift to all of us: that in the continuing struggles and too-often-heartbreak of this work together, this celebration of the Birth-Season—Santa included—was a rite of joy and solidarity.

As we looked forward to each successive year of Partying, we began to discover new learnings: that social-service agencies, by fiat and/or necessity, were adding increasingly exclusive guidelines, such as Social-Security numbers for the kids and “green cards” for the parents, and...well, more and more *stuff* that would somehow “legitimize” charity. While hoping not to assume—inwardly or outwardly—a stance of self-righteousness, we knew that the ultimate issue was only about the kids, whether or not they got to experience a real Christmas, yet all of the “legal” machinations seemed like simply another story of no room at the inn. We proceeded to pass the word via the grapevine that everyone was invited to Jesus’ birthday, that Santa was indeed “legally blind”—and, alas, the number of children began to explode geometrically.

In these several years—as we’ve gone from 26 to 350 children—we’ve experienced just about everything dismal and glorious along the journey: loss of electricity and heat (from an ice-storm) as we tried to sort and wrap two thousand presents; the sense of exhilaration of “family,” as people locally and across the country chose to “adopt” children through donations of money and gifts; the yearly chaos and utter exhaustion of last-minute confusion, errors, and additional late-night shopping; the occasional frustration of wrong-gifts-to-wrong-kid; the excitement, this year, of having students and faculty from the Culver Academies in Indiana travel a thousand miles to help with five days of hard work and preparation...and on and on. The entire operation, which now engages us in planning and work throughout the yearly calendar, has become the largest single event in our life together.

There is always that defining moment for each of us—a child or parent who catches our eye and heart—but I think that the moments which become clearest to us as active observers are those moments when “Santa and Ms. Claus” are handing out the Party present to each child in that immense, decorated room in a nearby church—while the parents are outside in the parking lot, secretly getting the remainder of the presents for their children...when we can see the crowd of sitting-children slowly—very slowly and

almost imperceptibly—moving as a group closer to Santa and Ms. Claus...wondering fearfully, it seems, if this is *actually* happening, if they *are* going to be remembered in this holy Season, if there really *is* a gift specifically meant for them. And the disbelief—based on what they’ve experienced in their young lives—disappears suddenly as their name is called...and they run, eagerly or eagerly/nervously/shyly toward the prize, the reality, the “yes” of their uniqueness.

Often, as I watch these kids—in this large inn—become the Christchild, I cry. The sad-tears are over the condition of a society which often punishes its hardworking people with unlivable wages, making gift-buying for their Christmas-kids utterly impossible; the joy-tears are droplets of thanks for the hearts and hands of those who work so hard for this, for the parents who bracket their weary egos to allow this to happen, for the many Companions everywhere who know the meaning of that word. I cry gladly and often when my heart recognizes—blatantly or subtly, in this inn or in the inn of our life together—transformation.

BIRTH

[from Old Norse *byrth*, emergence, to bring forth]

Will you be still?

Will you be very, *very* still?

Passionately still?

So quietly still that you can hear the heart beat even before the Birth?

So quietly still—just for these simple moments in your busy life—that you can hear, loudly within the stillness, the very first breath...the very *first* sound...of the Birth?

Will you be so still and quiet and attentive in the Birth-stable that you will know your own presence?

Will you be so utterly still that you will notice that the beating of your own heart *synchronizes* with the beating of the Newborn's heart?

Will you allow such outrageous stillness as to know—to *know*—that the Peace of the Child is being birthed within you?

Will you offer yourself such stillness that life begins anew—RIGHT HERE!
RIGHT NOW!—at this supremely still moment?

No thing is old any longer.

No thing is shame any longer.

No thing is has-been any longer.

No thing is second-guessed any longer.

No thing is outcast any longer.

No thing is once-again any longer.

No thing is other any longer.

No thing is known any longer.

Except this Birth.

You, in your absolute stillness, finally take the Infant to the bosom of your own soul.

You hear, perhaps for the first time in your entire existence, the only and perfect sound of the Birth of God in your being:

Yes!

DANCE

[from Middle English *dauncen*, to move in a lively manner]

We (Sr. Cindy Angela, Sr. Maria, and I) are back from France—bleary-eyed, time-warped.

The time in Paris was magical in a sense; part of that was simply the bizarre feeling of getting on a plane in Dallas—amid southern accents and cowboy boots—then falling asleep in the dark air, only to awaken seven-time-zones later to hear a flooding of French, Spanish, Italian, German, and other languages I couldn't even identify, people (often kindly) trying to direct us to the right exit, the taxi stand, the Rue de Buci.

On that street—in the heart of the Left Bank district (starving artists, well-to-do yuppies, extremely wealthy “new commerce” folks)—the unexpected magic is fulfilled, in the fifth-floor apartment in which our dear Companion, Loic, resides with his brother, sister-in-law, and four-year-old niece. Yes, Loic is dying—recently out of the hospital where the AIDS and cancer treatments were offered, where the doctors, only days before, had assured him that he had only “a few” days left to live, where they gently told him to go home to die.

It was to this drama that we arrived. Our friend was terribly ill, barely able to move, walk, eat—spending most hours in bed, the rest in a chair which sat before the nineteenth-century, living-room fireplace...sitting, almost comatose, while IV drips offered their minimal feeding of sugars and fluids and steroids and hope—hope for arresting the brain swelling, hope for periodic strength, hope for unimagined reunions and last words.

Yet, we began to experience the unexpected magic that comes from intentional acts rather than from exotic potions; we began to see scenes of aid and mercy which were not commonplace in our U.S. experiences of health crises: doctors actually visiting the patient's *residence* several times each week, nurses and caregivers showing up daily—whether to offer a kind word or a needed touch or a fill-in medication. I/we could not help but sense a burgeoning community of care, a feeling of new relationships which went beyond the designated patient to include any or all who happened to be present...who happened to be willing to minister to each other on whatever basis.

And then we were baptized—by eager greetings and introductions, by the European practice of a kiss-on-both-cheeks—into the larger whirlwind of new-friends, old-friends, French-friends, foreign-friends, loud-friends, quiet-friends...and so it seemed to increase, geometrically, with each passing day and night: an endless “salon” of tell-me-where-you're-from-and-what-you-do-with-your-life, stories exchanged, memories of past years with Loic recounted, good wine, clouds of cigarette smoke, new logs on the fire, interruptions of new IV drips, music from Europe and America (North and South), outrageous laughter, quiet prayers.

And in the middle of it all—for at least a few hours each day or night—sat Loic, sipping a bit of wine or espresso, occasionally sharing a drag off a companion's cigarette into his cancer-ridden lungs—somewhat gloriously unconcerned of the consequences—trying desperately at times to simply keep his head erect as he sat before the warming fireplace...but—even as we didn't even want to consider the hope of what danced before our eyes—there he was: Loic was, in his dying, coming alive! The death sentence, announced with suitable medical gravity only days before, was suddenly stayed—

somehow, more than the fluid drips were coursing his body, mind, and soul. The visiting doctors and nurses seemed genuinely surprised by this Lazarus-by-the-Seine, this gaunt dead-man-walking, who offered his own example of what we've been trying to say at St. Dismas for years and years: that community emboldens life.

No, this wasn't some kind of cheap grace; this wasn't the result of some French televangelist offering cures-by-donation; this wasn't the result of "official" prayers authenticated by God's "favorite religion"; this wasn't mumbo-jumbo stuff.

This was God's children—of all and no religions—gathering to offer whatever priesthood they had within them to their brother; this was Loic's own brothers reminding him of their boyhood adventures...touching him often with a held hand or a wiped brow or—and I cried silently as I watched it—putting a cheek next to his cheek for several minutes, whispering into his ear things that were not intended for the rest of us, but things which brought a slow and long smile to his leathery, discolored but beaming face; this was sisters-in-law attending to his every move, giving him looks that took my breath away, feeding him quieting soups and decorous pastries, brushing his hair with a quick hand, bringing a niece to his lap, presenting him with recent photographs of the year-old twins...and wondering, certainly as we were, if there were some "better" way to say goodbye.

No—I believe—there isn't.

It was time to leave. And we relearned the lesson of hundreds of previous vigils: that people do not live or die on our schedule. And so we had our last quiet time together, offering prayers of gratitude for Loic's life and presence among us. He sat with eyes closed, a faint smile, a surprisingly-firm grip on our hands; he received the oil of anointment onto his forehead, our words of love and thanks onto his heart. We said goodbye. We cried together, even as we held each other in final embrace. Four pilgrims—with no celestial miracles to offer, knowing that this physical life of our Companion would be over very, very soon—simply said goodbye as best we could.

And my most memorable, "restrictive" memory of this friend, this experience, my new and old friends, these lessons, this gift? Just as we were preparing to leave—as a pulsating Latin rhythm filled the room from the CD-player—Loic struggled mightily to stand up, then faced away toward the fireplace, then entered his own land-away-from-time, and feebly but obviously swayed his hips slightly to the music, and, for the moment, was transported to a place of the past and future. I remembered that King David danced; I remembered that Zorba danced; I remembered that I will dance one day.

And after eleven hours of jetting through space and seven more time zones, there we were back in the Dallas airport, again amid southern accents and cowboy boots, too jet-lagged to think connected thoughts, but very, very sure that somehow, in a foreign land, we had gotten another lesson in the sacred dance of life....

MARGIN

[from Latin *margo*, fixed border]

Recently, The Rev. Tom Steffen, Dean of the Chapel at the Culver Academies—and our Companion in this work—was assembling a large group of students and faculty to consider the possibility of going on “Spring Break Mission Trips,” instead of simply spending that vacation time at play. He called and asked if I would write something to present to this assembly, perhaps something that would beckon them to service on the “margins.” The invitation gave me pause to look at my *own* blessings of Community, and I replied:

I miss, very much, being able to see your faces and hear your words on a daily basis, and I’m certainly eager to spend time with many of you when I will again be back to Culver.

I’ve been asked to respond to the question, “What case can be made for service learning?” Of course, the specific, sub-question is: “Why should a student bother to be involved—on whatever basis or level—with folks who might live on the very margins of society, either in the U.S. or elsewhere?”

I won’t insult you, as students, by suggesting that your more frivolous thoughts of other options—like concentrating on cars or college or sex or career or comfort—are any more frivolous or different than the thoughts of us “older” folks; most of what all of us think or fantasize about, I believe, are those things which will bring us “happiness,” “glory,” “success,” or, at least, keep us firmly established in a safe, certain environment.

I could, certainly, offer you literally hundreds or thousands of quotations and/or stories from famed writers or speakers—those who are more eloquent than I, those who have poignant and heart-felt messages of religion or politics or a myriad of other angles—to somehow convince you that there are a multitude of reasons to risk the warmth and security of “now” to venture toward the possibility of “next.” Those quotations are usually genuine and convincing, indeed...yet, I wonder if someone else’s reason can realistically be *your* own reason.

I believe, rather, that your interest or your perspective might best be served by looking squarely into the eye of self-interest, self-realization, and self-fulfillment—and ask yourself the most demanding and important question of your entire life: *Who do I want to be?*

If you want to be a safe, “self-made,” enclosed, certain, defined, confined, sheltered, impervious *self*, then that is your right...and perhaps your present obligation; go for it!

If, on the other hand, you want to consider the possible benefits to your character and your future of learning about your *self*, outside of your comfortable place, I would (with bias, of course) suggest at least a few benefits to your *self*:

With some effort, you will find in each person “on the margins” a partially-hidden part of yourself...a part that needs expression;

if you will look into their eyes deeply, you will find a partially-hidden wound you are carrying...a wound that needs healing;

if you listen to their stories, you will hear partially-hidden parts of your own story...a part that needs telling;

if you are willing to feel their feelings, you will recognize partially-hidden

feelings of your own...feelings that express your own soul;
if you are willing to live with them, you will discover a partially-hidden
life within you...a part that hasn't yet been lived;
if you are willing to work with them, you will experience yearnings of
partially-hidden work within you...work that begs to be done;
if you will listen to their confessions—not as a confessor but as a pilgrim—
you will hear partially-hidden murmurings of your own heart...
murmurings that will serve you well;
if you will respect their own journey and struggle, you will perceive
glimmers of your own partially-hidden compass...a compass that
will become more accurate for you.

I can't imagine better rewards than these to your *self*; and yet—sometimes, even
in the uncertainty of risking such possibilities—there will be even greater gifts. Perhaps,
even if you remain uncertain as to who you want to be, you will discover who you *don't*
want to be.

Thanks for allowing me to offer these reflections, for in the doing of it, I am able
to remind myself of the very reasons why thirty-some years on the margins have been
such a journey...and such a gift.

ALIEN

[from Latin *alienus*, *alius*, a different other]

Some of them—hundreds of them—stand on a nearby street corner each morning, silently awaiting the hoped-for truck or car that might stop to offer them a day’s work, often at criminally-low wages. Some of them work in local factories or nurseries, using fictitious names and/or Social Security numbers, again, to obtain the lowest of pay rates. All of them, in my own experience, work long and *hard* for what they get. They are, of course, the “illegals” in our society, without “green cards” or valid IDs. They are immigrants, aliens.

We have increasingly been gifted with association and relationship with these folks, sometimes through cooperative labor, sometimes through clinic referrals, sometimes through the simple act of word-of-mouth. While early introductions came by the delivery of food boxes to houses, the intimacy of friendships has flowered through daily solidarity of common cause. We are gifted because they remind us, by their presence, of humility and patience and perseverance and hope.

Today, we—three Anglo-Americans and a husband-and-wife from Mexico—sit in the office of an immigration lawyer, a kind man who is willing to inform us, possibly, of the legalities needed to “legalize” these aliens into the U.S., to draw the legal map on how we might sponsor citizenship for these Companions, how we might obtain information for other, increasing-numbers of Companions who ask us questions we can’t answer.

I explain to our legal teacher that we are profoundly ignorant of current immigration law, but that we highly respect this couple sitting with us, both of whom are working honest jobs, as well as parenting their two-year-old daughter. What is it we need to do to help them immigrate legally, I ask.

He looks thoughtfully at his desk for a moment, obviously wanting to put the legalese into laypersons’ language, and says—gently, sensitively—“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Excuse me, but I don’t understand.”

“Well, under the current, stricter immigration laws, there are really only two avenues open to people: they can be sponsored by close family relatives—like a parent or an aunt or uncle—who are *already* naturalized...or they can possess an occupation vital to the U.S.—like a brain surgeon or something.” His smile was clearly one of regretful sympathy.

“That’s it!” I blurt.

“Yes, that’s it.”

“So if they don’t have immediate family who can sponsor them, they’re at a dead-end?”

“Yes...of course, they can try to wait for nineteen years, until their little girl achieves majority, and have *her* sponsor them then...if they can prove she was born in the U.S.”

I glance at our Companions, both of whom are kindly-smiling at the attorney.

Where have I been, I think to myself. Am I the only person in this country who didn’t know of this dead-end policy toward most immigrants? And now I’m *shouting* inside to my self: But what of Ellis Island? What of the “send me your tired, huddled masses” of the Statue of Liberty? “Nothing?” “Nothing!”

I stay outwardly calm. I look over at Sr. Maria and Sr. Cindy, both of whom look as shocked and forlorn as I, both of whom must be shouting something inside *their* selves. All of my middle-class, can-do, American spirit has evaporated into wordlessness, and I thank this gentle man for his time.

Outside his offices, we commiserate in the parking lot. I want to somehow apologize to our Hispanic friends...but for what? They obviously want to forgive me/us...but for what? Unrealistic hopes and dreams, not for all of us there, but for our nation's change-of-course. They speak of waiting the nineteen years—they say it with patience and almost-beatific smiles—as I think of my own impatience, knowing that they have much to teach me.

But, in this moment, I feel like an alien in my own land.

HARRIED

[Old High German *herion*, to lay waste, destroy]

I was reminded recently of a study that was done nearly 30 years ago at Princeton, a study designed to figure out the conditions under which good people would act for good, or at least be helpful.

Two psychologists asked seminarians to walk over to another building on campus to give a short speech, either about their motives for studying theology or about the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan. The psychologists had planted an actor along the way—slumped over, coughing and obviously in bad shape. The two experimenters had led half of the students to believe that they were late for their speaking appointment, and half that they had ample time. So, taking into account what they were thinking about on the way—“theology” versus “the Good Samaritan###—as well as how much time they had, what do you think determined whether students would help the man in need?

Contrary to expectations, the *content* of the speech made no difference. People asked to give either speech, including the Good Samaritan, were no different in how many stopped to help. What *mattered* a great deal, by contrast, was whether students were in a *hurry* or not.

Of those who were told that they were in a hurry, only 10 percent stopped to help. Of those told that they had plenty of time, 60 percent stopped to help.

I suspect that you and I are not so terribly different in our daily lives: I suspect that each and all of us answers the modern seduction of rushing hurriedly here and there—or if not here and there, at least in a hurry wherever we stand or sit—hurry to start or finish tasks, to answer the cell-phone, to shop, to surf the net, to pay bills...and even, sometimes, to hurry to love and serve. And, ultimately it seems, the hurry goes deep inward...and we become harried. *Mea culpa, mea culpa.*

There is, of course, a part of our ancient, pre-modern genes and soul that whispers to us the obvious: “It’s all nuts!” Yet, we are irritated by the nagging whisper, and the post-modern *animus* responds: “You don’t realize that *all* of this needs to be done! You’re an old voice, out of touch with reality, unsympathetic to my current demands. BE QUIET!” And the voice, accepting the denial temporarily, diminishes.

Unlike the study of whether the seminarians would “act for good or be helpful,” our study of ourselves might be about the possibility of staying sane and centered and...well, maybe a good word would be *intimate*.

In a world that seems to have gone somewhat berserk—with terrorism here and blanket-bombing there, with corporate-hegemony and corporate-bankruptcy, with two million people in jails and prisons, with headlines that batter us with the sophistry of an infomercial—we can easily dismiss our circumstance as yeah-that’s-the-way-it-is, hurrying even more, feeling irritated even more, perhaps opting for depression and/or apathy (from the Greek “without feeling or passion”).

An antidote?

Good question. I struggle with it, too. Yet I find myself going back to intimacy—and my trusty dictionary reminds me of *root* words of our human species: “innermost,” “essential,” “intrinsic,” “passion,” “personal,” “close- and long-association.” Yup, those are words that the whispering voice recognizes. Those are words that make some sense out of our nine-year struggle in Community to sit together in Sharing Groups...to

struggle and grope and confront and comfort those words into real life. And sometimes we want to *hurry* to conclusions and moralisms and quick-fixes...and the whisper tries to remind us simply of intimacy—of the risk, of the joy. Don't hurry, it nags. But hurry is easier, hurry is more in control, hurry isn't as much of a risk as intimacy...nor, of course, as sane and joyful.

This other side—the supposed “down-side” in this post-modern world—is that of *taking* time, of risking not to enter the loonyness of hurried and harried, of continuing the age-old possibility of keeping-on, sanely—as a Buddhist might say—washing the dishes over and over in the now-world.

I was reminded, again, recently of how “lost” we can become to the world's notice or interest if we're simply doing “the same old thing,” whatever it is, at a grace-full speed.

A sweet and kind woman had called me to get a work reference on someone who used to live in Community, and after discussing his qualifications with her briefly, she said, “You know, several years ago, I and some friends sent you a donation...and I was just wondering if you are doing anything in particular these days, because I never see anything in the newspaper or on the TV news anymore about St. Dismas.” A thousand thoughts seemed to go through my brain in a millisecond, and then I responded quietly with a list of our current works and ministries. She said that it sounded “wonderful,” and we exchanged good-byes.

I was reminded of how many times in the past 3-4 years that I've been asked about our “absence” from the newscasts...and if that meant that we really didn't *exist* anymore...or maybe that we simply weren't “keeping up to speed.” Then I thought of all the “ads” I get through the mail for special workshops and seminars and conferences about training for “charitable” organizations in public relations and advertising...and how not to “fall behind####; one ad said it most succinctly: “If you don't sell it, no one's going to buy it.” I still wonder what the “it” was.

I thought, too, of our assumption since the very first days of St. Dismas: that if we're doing the work that needs to be done—at whatever speed—then the world will support us spiritually, heartfully, and (perhaps) financially. If we *don't* do what's needed—at whatever speed—then there's really no reason for the world to support us in any way. I heard a snippet of a news program (speaking of advertising!) in which the author of a new book was being interviewed; the “catch” of this story was that the author was a monk who had published his “expose” of what goes on within the cloistered walls of a monastery. In his comments about that seemingly-anachronistic life (in fact, he said, life in the monastery is just as tense, gossipy, difficult, demanding, wonderful, joyful, awful as life anywhere else), he ended with the thought that if one's life is seen as “boring” or repetitive—if one tries to do the same meaningful work day after day—then our world will finally and simply turn away in disinterest. But does that mean that the “world” is sane?

In this current Lenten season, I want—as always—to speed things up...get through this desert quickly, get on with real life in a speedy world. But perhaps I miss the central lesson of sanity, of spirituality, of life together, of Lent...perhaps the Nazarene suffered from the same temptation that we do...perhaps that's why he forced himself to stay in the midst of it for those *long* forty days and forty nights...so that, for once, he could understand what sanity truly is.

I'll bet I could understand that, too...but, right now, I'm in a *hurry*.

PRAY

[from Latin *precari*, request]

“And we pray for Michael in New York...and Laura, Kate, Emily who stand in vigil...”

How many times we have said those words on Sunday and Wednesday evenings over these past many, many months. The words have become almost a “common” part of the liturgy, almost chanted now, along with the remembrance of so many folks that we may not even know personally, but who are now indelibly written in our hearts and minds.

“And we pray for Michael in New York.” When I uttered those words for the first time in the Chapel of St. Dismas, this man, thousands of miles away from our physical presence, was already into the fight of his life, the process of mightily battling this cancerous part of his brain: tests and more tests, chemo, assault-radiation, yet new tests, other medicines—well, you know the journey if you’ve ever stood vigil with someone who barricades against odds and “protocols.”

“And we pray for Michael in New York.” But I have never met him, talked with him, laughed with him, acted silly or serious with him. I suspect that I have cried with him...but neither of us really knew the time or place of the other’s tears, but perhaps we knew it was mutually about the frustration of it all, the up-and-down-progress-then-two-steps-backward pace, the wanting of proper words to Laura and the young daughters, Kate and Emily, saying the thank-you’s and the I-love-you’s in ways that would make them more special than the day before. Yes, you know the journey.

“And we pray for Michael in New York.” And then we would remember in words these three: this wife-woman and these two girl-women. I had met Laura—almost briefly—two decades ago when we both lived in New York; a friend-of-a-friend, she was single and sassy and certain and witty and warm...someone you’d wish was close down the block, in the neighborhood of easy visits, laughing dinners, and mutual friends. But life happens...and years later, through that mysterious reunion that we never quite expect, an old friend sends a long-overdue letter which mentions Laura, husband Michael, daughters Kate and Emily...and, suddenly, the neighborhood exists through letters back and forth, descriptions of families and work, words of good news/bad news, the tests, the surgery, the treatments, then how the girl-women are doing, a picture, the vigil. The girl-women learn of our work, and proceed to send boxes of clothes for the children here, helping us with our vigil, as they continue theirs. As we continue to chant, “And we pray for Michael in New York...” they do their best to somehow add their own words to Dad, words that will somehow get through the medications and treatments to this just-fifty-year-old man-child.

“And we pray for Michael in New York.” I said the same words when I was a thousand miles away from St. Dismas last week, introducing his name to other fellow-pilgrims who had not met him either. They didn’t ask specific questions about him or Laura or Kate or Emily, but they trusted my beckoning to Companionship just as I must trust theirs, and so prayers were offered: “...and Laura, Kate, Emily who stand in vigil.”

“And we pray for Michael in New York,” we will say again this night during the Requiem Eucharist, for we have received the letter, the Memorial Card, that announces his death: “Architect, son, brother, uncle, husband, father, musician, energy

conservationist, brain cancer patient...A gentle man with a deep and abiding reverence for God and earth.” A color picture of this gorgeous man-child, who just turned fifty-one, wearing a blue bandana, exuding life-quest in those bright eyes, dominates the text, yet is the witness to it.

The wife-woman pens a note, witness to who she is and to who they are: “I was with him when he took his last breath...it’s humbling to be present when the physical body dies. He had been in a coma...but I washed his hair just before...put his drumming sticks in his hands...and told him to walk toward the light. I now think the world can be divided into two groups—those who have changed their spouse’s diapers, and those who have not. I keep waiting for a sign that he got there, that his essence has been returned to him. I feel very much like I’ve just been released from a P.O.W. camp and should not re-enter the world too quickly. I’m tired and overly sensitive to light and noise. Thank you for keeping us in your prayers.” Yes, you know the journey.

“And we pray for Michael in New York...” and will again and again, on every All Saints Day of our future. And the chant will become a glad-song, a thanksgiving, not only for Michael and Laura and Kate and Emily—for intimate words and boxes of children’s clothes and common journey together—but for all of those who come into our lives in bits-and-pieces, mysteriously coming and going in our presence or absence, becoming a *part* of us...so that we may know who “us” is.

“And we pray for Michael in New York...” for giving us a gift, a reminder, of relationships we couldn’t even imagine—couldn’t even create in our manipulations—before, suddenly, they become *part* of us. And, yes, he has returned to his essence...and he does shout back from the light-land: “Remember, it’s all around you—every moment, every hour, every day—if you will only stay awake.”

“And we pray for Michael in New York...” even as he prays for us.

REFLECT

[from Latin *reflectere*, to bend back]

Years ago—in my wanderings *toward* community, but not yet clearly *of* it—I was driving through a large city of the South. This city held all of the horrors of our urban centers: vacant lots where stable neighborhoods once existed; the tattered aftermath of obvious “respectable” flight to the suburbs; the evidence of gangs, drugs, despair, and no-exit. As I drove along the main boulevard, surprised by nothing, my glancing eyes caught the image of a small church, standing on the corner of yet another street that looked like the Germany of World War II bombings. Like most local buildings, it was surrounded by a chain-link fence, and carried the ubiquitous, posted signs of “don’t-park-here-without-permission-or-you’ll-be-towed.” With no particular, conscious, agenda or reason, I pulled into the parking lot, wondering who might give me permission to park and visit.

After knocking on the “Office” door—which carried the truthful message, “Door Locked, Please Knock Hard”—I waited for a long time in the sweltering sun, and then knocked even harder...discovering that the door wasn’t locked at all...and entered the office area, finding no one. So I investigated the rooms and hallways—offering many a “Hello?” along the way—expecting to be suddenly confronted by a large person who would ask me what I was doing there...and who gave me permission to park outside.

Finally, though, a soft and inviting female voice responded from a room or two away, answering my query with her own “Hello?” We met in a hallway, she smiled kindly, heard that I had wandered in only in curiosity, and invited me on a “25-cent tour” of the premises. She was clearly proud of the ramshackle place, apologized for its condition only twice, and ultimately led me into the sanctuary. I was stunned by what I saw, and she—clearly used to such reactions—proceeded immediately with her story:

About eight years ago, this parish had shriveled to almost nothing—no money, no priest, almost no parishioners, certainly no hope. But the local bishop—wanting to give it one last chance, mainly because of its location in the area that most churches were abandoning—sent in a priest and his family for a one-year experiment in trying to revitalize this place. Well, the priest tried every trick he knew from urban renewal and urban church-building...and everything went thud...and he had almost decided to throw in the towel. As some sort of last gasp idea, he asked some little girls on the street one day what it was that they would like this church to do, to offer. Without hesitancy, they said to him, ‘A dancing school.’ So he put hard work and energy into the idea of a dancing school...but soon realized that the only room large enough would be this sanctuary itself...and if he did that, the parishioners would have to agree to some *major* changes, things like movable chairs instead of pews, ballet bars around the periphery of the room, and, of course, a lot of large mirrors throughout the space. Well, of course the parishioners said okay—even though they

grieved a bit over ‘things being different than always’...but they knew that this was a last gasp idea. After our priest raised a bunch of money from the bishop and the diocese, the changes were made...the dancing school was advertised all through these neighborhoods...and kids showed up by the dozens and dozens...both girls *and* boys—which surprised us...and it went wonderfully, with articles in city newspapers and special ‘human interest’ stories on local TV news shows...and the school has grown and blossomed ever since!

She was beaming brightly with the ending of the story, and I smiled broadly back at her, about to offer congratulatory comments of affirmation, but she continued before I could answer:

But the *really* interesting part of all this—at least to me—is the effect on the congregation. You see, once the alterations to the sanctuary were complete, we came in for our first celebration of the Eucharist—expecting to be simply proud of this new program and this new life to the parish, to adapt easily to the altered environment—but we were *not* expecting to experience what couldn’t be denied: that the mirrors—here, there, and everywhere—reflected our images to each other...that by looking in any direction, we not only saw ourselves, but virtually everyone else...everyone that we either liked or disliked in the parish family...and even if we changed seats or positions, there were other folks that we liked or disliked...we were, in other words, captured to consider ourselves through everyone else! It was very disconcerting, upsetting to study those reflections...to face our petty conclusions about ourselves and others...to not be able to easily ignore the very lessons that were being read in the Gospel, being heard in the sermon, being sung in the hymns. And yet, somehow it has forced us to acknowledge ourselves and our foibles...it has given us pause to look at visitors—many of them the parents and siblings of the kids who come to dance school—to stare at our own demons, I guess. As one of the older, longtime parishioners said early on, ‘It would be a lot easier place to worship if it wasn’t for those damned mirrors!’

So I suppose that’s what Jesus was talking about all the time anyway... that in offering up something to serve someone else’s need, we will somehow be changed or transformed in the process....

As I drove away from that dilapidated place, I knew that I had heard a wondrous, unintentional sermon.

CONTINUUM

[from Latin *continuus*, a whole characterized as a collection]

I sit with Sr. Maria on the front porch of Grace House. It's an early-spring noontime, and we sit side-by-side in the pleasant climate, both staring straight into the annual rebirth of life in this Sanctuary, each with personal thoughts of the day's obligations, yet both aware of the upcoming Annual St. Dismas Anniversary Bash, a ritual marking of what will be our entrance into the tenth year of this wondrous life. We both drink from tall glasses of our daily, famous/infamous ritual of Slimfast-whipped-in-a-blender-chocolate-shakes...our daily excuse and reason to simply *STOP*: to sit together in whatever mood or condition we're in, to compare notes, to share observations, to exchange information, to summon energy for the remainder of the day and night...and sometimes to sit comfortably or anxiously in silence.

As I stare, I think again—as I did years ago—of Thomas Merton's prayer: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so...Therefore, I will trust you... though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death."

While that prayer was scary and threatening to me ten years ago, today it feels like the "daily bread" of our life together in Community: no, we never *really* know where we're going...and yes, we don't have to *know* the road ahead; no, we don't know *where* it's headed...and yes, if we're awake to it, there will be breathtaking detours; no, we don't truly know ourselves *completely*...and yes, the journey together enlivens us with constant hints; no, we will never know whether we're *actually* following God's will...and yes, we're doing the best we can, given the circumstances; no, we're not *always* trusting...and yes, we're often courageous enough to risk that; yes, we are episodically lost, feeling the shadow of death all around...and no, we won't stop anytime soon this pilgrimage of Companionship.

As I stare, I rehearse in my mind those words we put in our *Book of Prayers, Liturgies, and Learnings*, those words of the "Prayers of the People" that we recite:

As we perceive the Presence of God in our midst, we are called to be especially mindful of:

The Creation in all its wholeness...

The Family of all peoples in all places...

Our own families, both of origin and choice...

Our friends and neighbors...

Those who are close but far away...

Those who are far away but close...

Those whom we have trouble loving, including ourselves...

Those whom we have called enemies...

Those who are in daily need...

Those who suffer in body or spirit...

Our ancestors, both ancient and recent...

Those who have been recently born...or died...

Those who are seeking rebirth...

Those who hold public trust in all places...

Those who are in a state of change or sorrow...

Those who have a special need...

And we celebrate the many blessings and joys of this life, giving heartfelt thanks for particular Grace.

And I know that we have seen it all—every bit of it, in any given moment—when we have been awake. And we will see more—when we are awake.

As I stare, I think of the thirty-some women, children, and men who live in this Community of safe Houses...of the hundreds who have—and will—pass through this tiny corner of God’s domain...of small victories in large wars...of nightmares of loss...and dreams that came true beyond our wildest imagining.

As I stare, I think of a story I’ve read and heard many times over the years from many different sources. Most attribute it to the Chinese. It’s a reminder that I try to keep with me daily:

An old farmer had an old horse for tilling his fields. One day the horse escaped from the corral into the hills, and when all the farmer's neighbors commiserated with the old man over his *bad* luck, the farmer replied, ‘Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?’ Several days later the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills, and now the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his *good* luck. He replied, ‘Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?’ Then, when the farmer's son was trying to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off and broke his leg. Everyone thought this was very *bad* luck...except the farmer, whose response was, ‘Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?’ Several weeks later, the army marched through the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth—except the farmer's son, because of his broken leg. All of the neighbors declared what *good* luck the farmer had again experienced, but the old man shrugged, ‘Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?’

So...has all of this been *good* luck or *bad* luck?

Who knows?

We may not *know*...but I think we get glimpses: that it’s *all* been “good luck”...whether it wrenched our hearts and guts—or not; whether we recognized it—or not; whether we mourned it or celebrated it, offered it a hosanna or a damnation, declared it holy or profane, pronounced it good or bad, accepted it or rejected it, stuck with it or abandoned it, cried it or laughed it, anointed it or exorcised it. Every given moment was good luck...what we call Grace.

As we stare, finishing our cups of communion, Maria turns to me: “Well, time to get back at it.”

And I respond, as usual: “Yup.”

RESOURCES

Internet websites which may be helpful:

The Order of Christian Workers
www.orderofchristianworkers.org

Community Pilgrimage
www.CommunityPilgrimage.org

FaithFutures
www.faithfutures.org

The Center for Progressive Christianity
www.tpc.org

Andre House (Phoenix)
www.andrehouseaz.org

Starcross Community (California)
www.starcross.org

The Catholic Worker Movement
www.catholicworker.org

Bruderhof Communities
www.bruderhof.com

Open Door Community (Atlanta)
www.opendoorcommunity.org

Hope Meadows Community
www.generationsofhope.org

Call to Renewal
www.calltorenewal.com

Faith in Action
www.center1.com

American Friends Service Committee
www.afsc.org

Unitarian Universalist Service Organization
www.uusc.org

Pax Christi

www.paxchristiusa.org

Jewish Peace Fellowship
www.jewishpeacefellowship.org

AIDS
www.aids.org
www.aidsquilt.org
www.unaids.org

John Lee
www.jlcsonline.com

Sojourners Magazine
www.sojo.net

Hope Magazine
www.hopemag.com

School of America's Watch
www.soaw.org

Alcoholics Anonymous
www.livingcyber.org

Books that may be helpful:

The Road Less Traveled, M. Scott Peck
The Different Drum, M. Scott Peck
If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Sheldon Kopp
The Five Gospels, Robert Funk, et al
Who Is Jesus?, John Dominic Crossan
The Gospel According to Jesus, Stephen Mitchell
Jesus Before Christianity, Albert Nolan
Childsong, Monksong, Brother Tolbert McCarroll
Being Priest to One Another, Michael Dwinell
All Saints, Robert Ellsberg
Prayers for a Planetary Planet, Fr. Edward Hays
The Last Temptation of Christ, Nikos Kazantzakis
Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, AA World Services
Living Sober, AA World Services
Tao Te Ching (various translations)
The Holy Man, Susan Trott
How Can I Help?, Ram Dass and Paul Gorman
The World's Religions, Huston Smith
The various writings by and/or about Dorothy Day
The various writings of John Lee

The various writings of Anthony de Mello

The various writings of Thomas Merton

The various writings of Henri Nouwen

The various writings of Hugh Prather

The various writings of John Spong

The various writings of John Steinbeck

About the author

Thomas L. Jackson, M.Div, Ph.D., has been the Abbot of The Order of Christian Workers since 1990, and founded the “mother-house” of the Order—St. Dismas House—in 1993 in Tyler, Texas. A graduate of Culver Military Academy (Indiana), Washington University (St. Louis), the Protestant Episcopal Seminary in Virginia (Alexandria), and the American Institute (California), he has also studied at Ohio University, and completed his clinical training at the University of Michigan Medical Center. He has had the honor of studying with such mentors as Dr. Ian Alger, Dr. M. Scott Peck, Fr. Dan Berrigan, Fr. Richard Rohr, John Lee—as well as thousands of Companions who have offered their wisdom and stories to his life, as both priest and clinical counselor.

Over the past thirty-five years, he has actively worked as a priest in urban, suburban, campus, and specialized ministries; a counselor in private practice, mental health agencies, and diocesan settings; a businessman; a carpenter; a designer; and author.

“Fr. Tom”—as he is known to most of his world—is married to Patricia Jackson, and is the father of Jenny, Peter, and Lisa, as well as the stepfather of Patton; there have been many “foster children” in his life over the past thirty-five years.

For the past many years, he and the St. Dismas Community in Tyler have worked with/lived with people with AIDS, people in recovery, the poor and homeless, as well as immigrants. There are now nine Houses in Tyler, as well as several throughout the United States.

Fr. Tom also convenes “Gatherings” at sites and parishes throughout the United States, in which folks come together for one to three days to share their lives and stories; groups recently have included Congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Unitarian, and Unity gatherings, as well as non-denominational groups; for further information: www.CommunityPilgrimage.org.

Fr. Tom also wrote and designed a six-color poster—*To Follow The Christ*—a thousand of which have already been shipped; information is available at the website: www.OrderOfChristianWorkers.org.

His odyssey in and through his various vocations and avocations has been recorded vividly in at least two books: *Go Back, You Didn't Say May I: The Diary of a Young Priest* and *In Any Given Moment*, both of which reflect the daily actions and the inner pilgrimage of his many callings. Three other books—*Moments of Clarity, Moments of Clarity, Volume II* and *Moments of Clarity, Volume III*—are so-called “commonplace books”: collections of stories and wisdom from throughout the world and history. A work that has been in progress for fifteen years, *Me, You, and Us*—a narrative and a “guide” for those seeking a reflection and consideration of their history, character, beliefs, and possibilities—has recently been published. Fr. Tom is also working on a larger edition of the spiritual book he’s written for use by the Order: *A Book of Prayers, Liturgies, and Learnings*.

Along with his other activities, Fr. Tom will also be traveling between Texas and Indiana, not only maintaining his role as Abbot of the Order in Tyler, but also working as “Chaplain to the Community” at the Culver Academies.