

Loose Plate Over a Manhole

The Spiritual Scrapbook of a “Team Mennonite”

Peter Hoover, Puerto Octay, Chile, 2000

1

The Meeting

Behind Costa Rica’s supreme court building where a patch of grass (rare in downtown San José) lies between a side street and their front door, the Quakers have their meetinghouse. We met there, a few Friends and a few Mennonites, trickling in from empty Sunday morning streets before the clerk said, “We should start now.” Then silence came like a dove on the sunlit room.

We sat in a circle, some on a sofa, some on stacking chairs between the library and the office. A stuffed literature rack hung beside an open door to the patio. Out there they kept their cleaning supplies, I supposed, behind a wooden door with its corner cut on a slant under the stairway.

The sun streamed in through two south windows and made patterns on the hardwood floor.

Every person coming in from the street and sitting down made the silence more complete. Our baby sat on the floor, another couple’s baby in a stroller between them.

The warbling songs and chirps of birds outside, and once in a while the soft exclamations of our babies playing, echoed through the room. We did not look up.

Tom, from California, spoke first. His gentle voice startled us, like the voice from Sinai. What he said about faith (I forget the point) struck us to the heart with its clarity and depth. Then all was silent again.

Empty. Yet rich and full. Aware of Christ and one another. Beautifully aware of changing time and self in galaxies spinning around—city and birds and shade trees notwithstanding. Around with the universe, but flowing upward and open on every side to the light. The middle-aged woman in a skirt across from me wore glasses on her common matter-of-fact face—the kind of face one would see behind the counter at the post office. She sat with her eyes closed and her feet side by side on the floor.

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Have we forgotten something?

Over a period of years I have met many seekers, unhappy, unfulfilled men and women—a surprisingly large number of them in “Biblical” churches. For a time I was also unhappy and unfulfilled, finding no help in conventional cures: reading up on temperaments and marriage, studying Christian beliefs with their numberless Bible interpretations and doctrines, listening to great preachers, getting involved in religious activity and “service.” Then I rediscovered what some Christians have always known.

“Early Christians,” some Eastern and Western believers of the Middle Ages, a few Protestants and nonconformed believers have always lived in a special kind of relationship with Christ. Some know it as the “contemplative way.” Some dismiss it as religious mysticism (believing it to be a great error) and want nothing to do with it. But when I came upon it, in part through the life and thinking of the plain people among whom I grew up, I discovered in it exactly what I needed—and what I suspect others may need as well.

What do plain Anabaptists get out of long silent prayers? Why do Friends sit together in meetings, doing “nothing”?

For people today, obsessed by a constant need for action, change, sights, sounds, excitement, fulfilment and results, the very idea of waiting in stark simplicity on God is puzzling, or absurd. Some who do not understand, make fun of silent meetings or criticise the “empty” lives of plain groups. Unfortunately, both members and ex-members of those groups, no longer familiar with their spiritual background, contribute to false beliefs about them.

I write this book not only to inform you—without emptiness there can be no fullness—but in the firm belief that some of you who read it may be called to what no one has told you much about.

To contemplate Christ in a special way may not be everyone’s calling. But it may be your calling, and if it is, you will not be happy or fulfilled until you discover it.

For some of us it is not enough just to know “the Bible is true and God exists in heaven.” We long for interactive unpredictable friendship with God. This, in fragmentary “scrap-book” form, because it is hard to write about such things, is how I found it:

2

Fear

Born in Kitchener, Ontario, on May 18, 1960, I lived with my parents, two brothers and three sisters, on a farm near the village of Linwood. We belonged to the Orthodox Mennonites, a conservative group among the “team people” (people who use horse-drawn vehicles instead of cars) and sold butter, eggs, and vegetables to customers from the city.

Our year's work began in the greenhouse. In its cheerful warmth—while snow melted outside and a fresh wind fluttered its plastic shell—we transplanted tomato seedlings and flowers in the scent of peat moss, fertiliser, and warm earth. My mother, with a duck apron tied around her skirts, loved to work in the greenhouse. She tended its kerosene stove and opened paper packets from the Ontario Seed Company. "*Ma setze de Zwieble newig 'm Graut* (we will set the onions next to the cabbage)," she said.

Our little geese also came in the spring.

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Spring break-up flooded the creek beyond our spruce trees and spread in widening lakes across snow-covered fields to the south and west. There, among ever-changing seas and islands to which I gave Dutch or East Indian names I waded in my boots until the sun went down and the flood waters turned red.

The sky. I stood still for I had never seen a sky like that before—*islands and islands*, God rolling back the curtains of glory to palm trees and mountains shining in seas of melting snow.

On my way in, where the ice smelled like spruce needles I pried some seed cones loose with my wet fingers. When my mother asked why, I told her, "To keep, for when we move away from here."

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When the April sun turned warm and the land dried off, we got out the heavy team. From the harrow platform where I stood with the reins taut and four horses plodding on ahead I watched the ploughed earth—soaked, frozen, and snowed-under during the Canadian winter—loosen up to numberless particles rolling and twisting through the harrow's teeth as the field smoothed out to lie like a bread cloth across the hill.

The horses, in the spring sunlight, sweated under their collars and where the traces rubbed. They still smelled like the stable, and I knew that with the sweat, the dust, and the scent of Queen Anne's lace coming up in the fence rows the work would not stop. Every day, from morning chore time to after the evening meal—all summer long—there would be hay to mow, corn to cultivate, grain to stook, or manure to haul.

The big boys would talk loudly and let their shirt-tails hang out. They would wrestle and laugh while pitching sheaves and dig furiously into wagon loads of grain to feed the threshing machine. Back in the straw shed, the air black and rolling with dust, a handkerchief tied over my nose and mouth, my job would be to watch the straw blower.

One doesn't complain. "This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat." Relentlessly the world and the work would go on. But even though it smelled like seeding time, and even though the sun was drying off the land, it stopped on Good Friday.

On Good Friday we did not think of working. In calm detachment from all things mundane, refusing to as much as remember the seed grain piled onto the box wagon in the lower driving shed or the binder twine pulled between marking stakes in the garden, my teenage sister and her friend took me with them on a walk after meeting, in our Sunday clothes.

In no hurry, listening to birds building nests in the spruce trees, we crossed the cow yard and a bridge. Down to a bend in the creek where my father had long ago stacked a pile of fence rails and left scrapped implements under the willow trees, we walked with our blue song book.

Water gurgled over the rocks. Minnows darted about in the pools. Under drooping branches just turning green I sat with the girls in their black dresses for *Karwoch* (Holy Week). We sang, "Revive us Again."

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We cleaned house in the spring. *Raus mit 'm Grām* (out with the clutter) motivated my mother and big sisters to dig—head scarves tied at the back and sleeves rolled up—into the deepest, darkest closets upstairs, bringing seldom-seen boxes and cardboard barrels out into the light. Their dust rags scented crowded halls and echoing rooms with Amway cleaning fragrance. Mattresses rode out to the top porch to air. Winter bedding—washed to put away—hung flapping in the April sun. Even the stairway to the attic stood open. But no place held a greater attraction to us “little ones” than the *Sauwestub* (clean room).

The clean room, at the southeast corner of the house, upstairs, ordinarily remained off limits. Dark green blinds covered its bay window to the east, and a south window, too high and special to look out through maple trees into the barnyard. I only saw the room when my sisters took their friends into it on Sunday afternoons to admire their growing collection of quilts in cedar chests, their china—all manner of bowls and cups they had received as gifts—arranged on white needlepoint over bureaux they would get from home, and stacks of hooked rugs pulled out from under the bed.

But now, in the spring, the clean room stood open. Not only were its dark green blinds cautiously lifted. They lay out on the porch and we explored its mysteries, the big girls “glass boxes,” their sweet-scented gift soaps, straw flowers, and wedding handkerchiefs as much as we dared.

The clean room, we learned little by little as we grew older, was where they entertained special company on Sunday evenings after we had gone to bed.

The rest of the house would get cluttered again. We would work and play in its other rooms and about the farm. But the clean room would stay quiet and beautiful—waiting.

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On a Sunday when we had no meeting we drove to my great-uncle Emmanuel Sherks' place in Wallenstein. A cold wind from the east blew around the house where the men sat in the semi-dark visitors' room to visit. Hooked rugs covered the floor. A table holding the women's bonnets and shawls, and our over-clothes, stood in one corner. Guests from British Columbia had come. We ate apples in the afternoon, and with their little girl, Rebecca, we played hide-and-go-seek up and down the stairs.

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After I fell from a stump and broke my arm in 1965 a Mennonite woman, Frau Goosen, and later Frau Siemens, refugees from the Ukraine who had come to Canada through Brazil, worked on it after the operations (they had to re-break it to set the bone). Frau Siemens lived in Virgil, close to Niagara-on-the-Lake, and we took the bus to see her.

When Mom and I went by ourselves I sat beside a woman wearing a hat. The wind whistled at the front door of the bus as we followed the shore of Lake Ontario, along the Queen Elizabeth Way. The woman talked English to me. She pointed across the whitecaps to a steamer growing small out by the horizon. "That ship," she said, "is one of the last large steamers afloat and my brother works on it." From her purse she pulled a post card of the ship and gave it to me.

Frau Siemens' tiny living room, with a German Scripture on the wall and potted cyclamens inside the window, had a glass door. A fresh wind blew rain in from the lake but inside the room, painted white with a red rug on the floor, it was pleasantly warm and smelled of wintergreen.

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When our parents visited Johann and Margarethe Bergen, an old couple in our congregation, my sister and I went along. Their house was quiet and clean. A chest for firewood stood behind their stove. Their only daughter had gone with the young people

so we played by ourselves in their carpenter shop. It had a window to the south and he worked with cedar. Our buggy, unhitched, stood on pine needles in the woods outside.

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Once a month I visited our doctor's office in the village of St. Jacobs for allergy shots. Sometimes I went by bus and had several hours free.

Wealthy people lived on the back side of St. Jacobs in great dark houses under the pines. I explored their Victorian gardens and found a path down to where carefully trimmed lawns ended in sprays of bridal wreath and flower beds along a mill race, no longer in use. Where the light came down on a wide space between the trees, E.W. B. Snider's mansion stood, mint green and almost small in its surroundings, with delicately glassed-in promenades under the heat of a summer afternoon.

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Repeatedly, we children heard the whispered command: "*Sei mal ruhig!* (be still)," Whether at meeting, at home when older people visited, or simply when there was nothing else to do, we learned to be still.

Sitting still, the light of other worlds may break in upon us.

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On summer nights we left the windows to our upstairs bedrooms wide open. Before the *Junge* (the grown up young people) came home on Sunday evenings I lay awake as one buggy after another rolled by. I listened to the song of their horses' dancing feet and the rattle of steel tires disappearing down the gravelled road.

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A great rain in the afternoon turned our summer kitchen dark. Repeated crashes of thunder, rolling and echoing through the clouds, drew closer, and my mother told us to sit still “while the voice from Heaven speaks.” Rain pelted the yard, lit at intervals by flickers of lightning, and water ran down the sidewalk outside the south screen door. Sitting on the bench behind the summer kitchen table, we listened and feared.

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Some fear is holy and deep, like joy.

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One brotherhood under God, not our work, was the centre of our existence, and no tragedy wounded as deeply or turned our heavens as dark as when it threatened to disintegrate.

My father, a *Diener* (servant) in the congregation, virtually stopped talking on such occasions.

All Sunday afternoon, one August, we spent in painful inaction. None of us felt like playing. We could not read. Dad lay on the couch, resting, with his eyes closed and Mom, her lips a short straight line, made hardly anything for supper. Then the young people came home.

Nancy spoke softly. She and Velina and we school children sat with our Philharmonia Sacras on the north porch where a breeze from the west moved the sultry air. The books, like the girls’ Sunday dresses, carried the faint but exciting scent of glory and we sang, “By cool Siloam’s shady rill, how fair the lily grows. . . .”

It got dark and we began to accept the great wrong with patience (some from our brotherhood were minded to admit a new member, previously ordained, as a servant)

and as we sang a change came over Dad. He got up and went out to look after the horses.

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Siloam's shady rill, for a long time I came to this place for prayer. I saw it when I closed my eyes, some distance from the Holy City, and an angel would come there to receive my messages for God. The trees met above the water and the young angel, kind but always serious, was friendly. Sometimes I had to wait a long time with my eyes closed until he came.

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From before I could remember, my mother would take me to a specialist in the city of Kitchener. A bald stocky Italian man, he identified my ear problems as allergy related. On a visit to his office in the summer of 1966 he told me I would need an operation—at once.

Before my mother took me to St. Mary's hospital we went to Waterloo Square. From a table loaded with reduced things she let me choose a book. I stood and watched the sea horses in the pet shop aquariums. The lights were coming on when we caught a trolley to Queen Street and St. Mary's. Then she left me in my room on the tenth floor and went home.

A gentle nun in a white habit tucked me in and told me good-night.

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In the hospital I began to understand and speak English. I also began to join the staff in morning prayers where I learned to cross myself and pray: "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." It fascinated me, and to the amusement of the nurses, I kept doing it throughout the day. But when I showed my sisters, at home, what I had learned, my mother taught

me to pray with a non-Catholic *Sprüchli* (a little saying) instead: “Ich danke dir meinen lieben himmlischen Vater, für alle deine Gaben, und alle deine Wohltaten mit denen Du uns gesegnet hast. Durch Jesum Christum, Amen.”

It was a nice prayer, but only of thanksgiving, and I was glad when I started to school and learned the Lord’s prayer as well.

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A loud crack came after hours of thunder and rain. At first we thought it struck the tin roof of our barn, newly filled and standing in the rain with the year’s crop inside. Jesse, my cousin who lived with us that year, climbed into the straw shed to see.

What he saw was a thick black column of smoke rising from the neighbour’s farm beyond the willow trees. Some of us ran. Someone hitched Lady to the buckboard and the women hopped on without their bonnets. Old Order people roared past on tractors. Boys, peddling furiously, passed us on their bikes. But Orvie Wideman’s barn was gone. Not even the pigs could be saved.

Bursting from the straw mows, flames roared and lunged out at us. Firemen sprayed the house to keep it safe. All we could do was go home and bring our own cows in through the muddy yard to milk. Then it began again.

Harder and harder the rain came down. The leaves of the Norway maple outside our second storey window picked up in sound as the wind rose. We had put out the lamp but Jesse got onto his hands and knees to look out.

“It will be alright,” he said, as he closed the window further. Almost continual flickering lit the walls and majestic booms in the south-west rolled through the night.

With my eyes closed I pictured God flying in rose-lit heavens far above the thunderheads (his appearance was kind and his garments fluttered about him), and I

noticed that the thunderheads were small. Very small. God moved them about with his hands, and little balls of lightning that darted from them did not escape without his direction.

For months following I prayed to God above the thunderheads. And my prayers always included, "*Mach de Annamary zu unsa Gmeh kumme.*" (Direct Annamary to join our community.)

Annamary Rohrer was the wife of one of our convert members. She was a kind woman and I wanted her to be with us and God after she died.

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For my birthday my second-oldest sister gave me a card. It was a used one (a Christmas card in fact) she probably found among boxes of discarded clothes left by customers from the city. "I thought you would like this," she said. It had a picture of a man in a brown robe and a cord around his middle, standing in the snow. On bare trees around him, and on the ground sat birds of many colours. The man looked happy while feeding them. "Make me an instrument of your peace," the card said, and I kept it among my treasures.

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Clop, click, clop, click, clop, click, clop. Lady was a big, homely, mare. Her trotting on the highway from the Three Bridges to Saint Jacob's kept our steel tires turning out endless, wavering lines on the wet road behind us. Sitting on a low seat in the box of the carriage, facing backwards, I watched the wet spring landscape unfold: black trees along the hills and down by the river, snow melting in the fields, poison ivy hanging dead on saggy fences. Houses and barns sat snugly back their long lanes.

Some houses had little attic windows. I wondered what antique treasures they guarded, high and dry, behind them.

Saint Jacob's on this wet spring day was empty. After getting my allergy shots at Doctor Young's I waited on Mom and Dad across from the Mill End Store. Once a supermarket (and later the Stone Crock Restaurant), the place was a used furniture, book, and clothing outlet. Old lamps and assorted china crowded the shelves. But I stopped looking through things when a painting caught my eye.

On a side wall above a huddle of grey and brown sofas a Red Cross nurse stood on the rocks at Walvis Bay. She was young. Far out over the sea, war planes droned across a leaden sky. Torpedoes shot from the waves and a ship was going down.

I sat until Mom and Dad came.

Mom had brought a tube of Aramycin from Dr. Young's. I unscrewed it from time to time, riding home in the back of the carriage, while thinking of Southwest Africa, the Red Cross, and things beyond, in its antiseptic fragrance.

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In silence and inner freedom, we discover the infinite.

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A couch, a rocking chair, and a little chest of drawers stood in our screened-in north porch. On a shelf above my mother's wringer washer, we kept our *National Geographics*. I read there, and wrote on the drop-leaf table, close to the yard and the trees.

On a summer morning, too wet to make hay, I watched a cedar waxwing in our mulberry tree. Chicory flowers stood bright blue in the rain.

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Our knees got caked with earth from creeping through the garden, cleaning rows of lettuce, onions, and the asters Mom had planted along the garden headland. But, miraculously transformed, the damp earth and work became a palace when I discovered our dill plants. Graceful branches, a forest of exotic splendour, crowned with sprays of perfumed buds in the dim light of an overcast summer morning. Among them, bishops and princes, in my mind's eye, strolled through arcades of the Notre-Dame at Reims.

Saint Remi and the Franks, among the scents of dill and earth, became my favourite south Europeans that day.

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McCormick Deering. All day long I read the cast iron letters on the cross frame of the scuffler while corn leaves glistened around me in the sun. The horses plodded slowly back and forth. With my feet on pedals I steered the scuffler and kept it from tearing into the stalks. Hour after hour. Horses and corn. McCormick Deering, spelled out in my mind, became a little song.

Scuffling corn was a good job while the sun shone.

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My mother filled over a thousand glass jars of fruits and vegetables every summer. Most of them came from our own farm, but our cherry trees did not bear well and my brother David (already married) and I left at the break of dawn for Elam Schantz's place east of the Three Bridges to pick more. Tall black-cherry trees stood around the horse pasture north of their barn. It began to rain. We picked fast. My extension ladder slipped at a frightening height. The trees were wet and David decided to give up and go home.

With buckets of cherries behind the seat we had almost reached Manasseh Widemans' farm before the storm broke. White sheets of rain swept down, blinding us, and causing water to stand around our feet in the buggy box. Our fluttering umbrella could not keep us dry and June, David's mare, buckled against the wind as he urged her on.

Manasseh Widemans' driving shed doors stood open. After a final rush through water shooting from the eaves we stopped, soaked, in its dusky shelter and safe. Dripping, we stood and watched the rain.

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"Down Meeting," for us, was to gather in the bare-floored curtainless houses of our members in the Winterbourne and New Jerusalem areas. They had geraniums blooming on their window sills. At Ephraim Webers' place wooden rods for drying clothes hung from the kitchen ceiling. They had painted them grey.

During summer meetings they left the door open onto the front veranda and made no fire in the kitchen stove. Back from the door we little boys sat on steps going upstairs. We heard the sparrows chirping and smelled the *Stoltze Heinrich* flowers blooming dark purple outside.

The girls sat in rows on wooden folding chairs, black capes and aprons on cheerful prints. All their white head coverings looked alike. They folded their hands in their laps.

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Out on the lawn facing the road, we little boys were the first to see "outsiders" come: a group of young people from the *Großgme* (big church) to sing. A grandmother lived at Ephraim Webers. She did not belong to our people but to the "big church" and these young people came to sing for her.

Every head turned. Even the old men sitting on chairs under the trees stopped talking to look.

They came silently, rolling in the lane on rubber tires. Their horses bathed in sweat—some were pacers—looked almost effeminate in thin breast-collar harnesses.

We saw the narrow brimmed hats of the boys, and their neckties, as they tethered their horses. Girls that stepped from the buggies wore black shawls. But they folded them on the square, and draped them lightly over dresses that for us were far too lightly coloured and short. (They did like that in the “big church.”)

We children followed them into the Grandmother’s room. In four-part harmony (the likes of which we had not heard before) the hymns made it unnecessary for us to speak: “Lead me safely on by the narrow way, from the shores of time to the realms of day,” they sang. “By the cross of Christ may I ever stand, as I journey on to the promised land. Lead me on! Lead me on, by the straight and narrow way. Lead me on! Lead me on, to the realms of endless day.”

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On another Sunday after “down meeting” we played under spreading trees on Allen Webers’ yard after supper. We heard ambulances and police redirected us on our way home because of an accident on the Listowel cut-off. Thunderheads in the east turned rose red and sheet lightning lit them from within. “Hark, what mean those holy voices, sweetly sounding through the skies?”

Under the heavens our earth became small as we rolled home on our two-seated carriage past Onias Webers’ place on the blacktop road.

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A cold rain washed the north windows of our one-room school in the fall. Driving against them—they were tall windows with many panes—it kept us in during recess time when we had to leave the lights on and the girls jumped rope in the basement: “One, two, buckle my shoe, three four, shut the door. . . .” The boys, rough-housing in the cloak room or throwing bean bags from one stairwell clear through the front entry to the other, did not notice when I failed to join them. They seldom did on rainy days when one could select volumes of the World Book from shelves where the globe stood under hanging ferns to read about Dutch Guiana or the Arabic people of Lakshadweep. . . .

Everyone lived in spheres—personal spheres as large or as little as they made them. I pictured mine a compact one, perfectly round, inviolable, clean and light under jasmine and flowering lemon trees. I had a written code of rules for conduct within my sphere—let the rest take care of their own—and every day I would come to God for ritual ablution.

Far out in the desert I would see myself on a grate, hidden from the public in an oasis of papyrus and palm trees. There I would confess my sins to God. An angel would rinse them down through the grate—a crimson flood—and I would be free again.

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Mom and the girls were gone the day Dad and I built cupboards in a little room upstairs.

Before I went to school I used to sleep in that room. Now, among the sawdust, the rasping of the handsaw, and the hammering and holding of clean pieces of plywood, new cupboards took shape. In between times when Dad needed me, I read “Heidi Grows Up” in my room.

Lausanne, the Grisons—Switzerland and our European Anabaptist origins found a place upstairs, while Dad whistled at his work and the women were gone.

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Behind our lumber shed, a slowly disintegrating building on the edge of our spruce trees (it had been the woodshed of someone's house) I had a place. One entered it alongside a rail fence surrounding our cow yard and a pheasant pen. Completely covered with spruce branches, not high enough for a grown-up to stand in, the place was hidden and quiet. Fine gravel and spruce needles covered the walkways I lined with pieces of brick. A tunnel under the branches led out into sunlight above the creek.

Against the back wall of the lumber shanty I made a bench.

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The man my father hired to clean out our ditches with a back-hoe left a perfect volcano-shaped mound of earth where two creeks joined south-west of our cow pasture. I named it Mont St. Michel and spent hours on its lower slopes. No one could see me where the deep creeks came together and a *Wollkraut* plant grew. I tended it carefully. Its fuzzy, greyish, leaves retained their colour long after the grass dried up around it and summer turned into fall.

School began in September and with it came cold weather and rain. But I visited Mont St. Michel in the evening, before I had to go in for supper and chores.

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Traffic on King Street rushed past the Provident bookstore's plate-glass windows on a snowy evening in Kitchener. Every time the door opened a chill draft and more snow entered the clean brightly-lit area among book shelves where I would read until the bus left for home. I read about a family in London during World War II. The story, told by the daughter of a communist agitator, described their nights in a bomb shelter, how one of her sisters got into trouble with a boy, and the depths of their war-time poverty. On the store's sound system they played Bortniansky's *St. Petersburg* I recognised as "*Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe. . .*"

We left Kitchener on the bus while street lights shone in the falling snow.

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On Saturdays, usually in the forenoon, we ground our feed. A diesel motor on the barn hill powered our hammer mill. For a full hour the motor roared and the air turned white with dust as we filled our bags and shovelled grain into a chute from an overhead bin. It was hard work, even in the winter. But as soon as we finished Dad would disappear and I would clean up in peace alone.

Pulling the great doors onto the den floor shut, I would stand to look out from a little door onto the barn hill. Behind me old beams held hay mows in dusky expanses, full. Granaries sat above ladders with wooden rungs. Cats found dark corners in the hay, and pigeons made their nests among its rafters. The barn, when we did not grind feed, was a place in which to hide and rest.

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On a hazy day with spring turning to summer and weeping willow branches hanging limp in the heat of noon, I walked home from school. In gently diffused light our meeting-house stood at the crossroads. It was empty, a week day, and flowing between me and it, a creek disappeared through a culvert beneath the gravelled road to curve across my uncle Dan Bauman and my brother David Hoover's farms.

The slow thunder of a jet passed over and I stood still—awe-struck at the intrusion of another world (the real world?) upon our summer crossroads at noon.

Three mail boxes stood by the bridge.

3

Death

After finishing school, in 1974, I began to “go with the young people.” On ordinary Sundays after meeting that involved eating a meal together in someone’s home. Boys sat on one side of a long table, and girls on the other. In the afternoon we sang from a book called the Philharmonia Sacra. Then, after a hockey or baseball game, or going swimming, we would have another meal together and spend the evening in more serious diversions. During the week we learned to take our place, as young adults, in community activities like harvesting crops, building houses and barns, butchering, cutting firewood, and celebrating the holidays. For some time, during the mid-1970s, I worked in my uncle’s sawmill.

To bring in the cows early, on a Sunday morning, I used a storm lantern. Back across the fields, under a black and windy sky lit only by a strip of city lights in the far southeast, I struggled through mud and corn stubble. The cows lay, backs to the wind, down by the creek.

Our hurry was to get ready and drive to “down meeting.” But the dog changed that. Sudden frantic barks and a powerful smell of skunk from the direction of the creek told the story. By the time I had the cows in, the dog cleaned up, and myself in shape for meeting, it was too late. So we went to Josiah Martins on the eleventh line.

It rained all morning. Many of our people had gathered there, but no one my age, and I played hide-and-go-seek with a troop of children. In the straw shed at the east end of the barn, where an opening in the gable faced empty fields and a cold rain-blown sky, I lay, not caring if they found me or not.

Gusts of rain hit the tin roof and wind rattled the weather boards, but on top of the straw it was dark and warm.

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From the jar and apple cellars in the basement with their smell of musty cement floors and braided onions hanging from low ceiling beams (among which we kept our stoneware Leyden and Haarlem wine jugs) to the attic, our house got a thorough cleaning after Christmas, 1972. My sister Nancy got married.

The week before the wedding, with the hall door open, the blinds removed from the windows and my sisters shaking rugs (in the winter) from the top porch, I took time out to read.

Nancy's pineapple cans came from South Africa.

Durban. Afrikaans. Blacks and East Indians. On the couch with a British geography book, I could not read enough about them, or get done looking at yellow can labels that showed workers on a vast pineapple field with mountains along the horizon.

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My brother, always thinking of new things to invent and do, took my friend Aaron and me along to Chatham, Ontario, to look for beet sugar equipment. Sugar had become so expensive in Canada that our people had begun to look for ways of making our own.

On flat land around the city we saw sugar beet farms and Redpath's obsolete machinery, junked behind their company warehouse. We rode the buses, tagged along with my brother (he walked fast) from office to office, and it got dark before we returned to the Chatham station.

Freight trains came and went. V-16's throbbing, locomotives stood on glistening tracks that lay flat and straight, west into the night.

* * * * *

We cannot help but discover the knowledge of good and evil. At first, its terror may fascinate us. It is a grown-up feeling. But in a little while we discover it brings us only shame and other kinds of fear.

* * * * *

All summer long my father left the horses out for the night. But one evening, when a wind came up and a thunderstorm moved in from the south-west, he changed his mind.

The horses did not change theirs.

Round after round we raced through the pasture. The sky above us turned black as stars disappeared and flashes of lightning lit their flying manes. Back the bush lane they thundered. Round and round, maddening circles through the seven-acre field between the cow pasture and the creek. But my anger dissolved in naked fear.

Rain came down in sheets. The universe lit up, purple and green, before splintering cracks, then booms, and more booms. The heavens resounding with thunder in the rain made tears a matter of little consequence.

The horses would not come in. The devil seemed closer than God. Transfixed in terror I remembered the angel. He came and the fear went.

It took a long time to get the horses. But by the time they had come galloping through the cow yard, skidding around the silo and clattering into the shelter of the stable where a lantern hung, a new poem had taken shape in my mind.

Though all the world is strange and dark

And evil powers surround,

And fiendish mobs attack my soul

On unfamiliar ground.

I'll praise the Lord and Saviour mine,
 His light and beauty 'round me shine,
 Released from fear in peace divine,
 With angels, holy angels, by my side.

Though storms of hell the heavens rend,
 And thunder shakes the whole,
 I know that God in heaven sits
 In undisturbed control.

Though sons of earth grow faint in fear,
 My heart shall rest serene.
 I have a holy body guard,
 That they have never seen!

I'll praise the Lord and Saviour mine,
 His light and beauty 'round me shine.
 Released from fear in peace divine,
 With angels, blessed angels, by my side.

My father helped me tie up the horses.

* * * * *

The summer I turned fifteen we no longer had a hired man. In for dinner (it was Saturday and raining) I had time to be in my room in the middle of the day.

The freshness of maple leaves outside my upstairs window, of wet earth and air, drifted in. I prayed. It was a short prayer but with it, forgiveness came like a flood. This must be what *Bekehrung* (conversion) means!

But some time later it went away. Then I repented and prayed again.

And again.

* * * * *

Ploughing, with five horses tandem, I finished the twelve acres straight back our bush lane on Saturday afternoon. The last piece was a three-corner from the gate down to the creek. A storm front had moved in and threatened to block out the sun.

*Behold the glories of the Lamb, amidst his Father's throne,
Prepare new honours for his name, and songs before unknown!*

The plough lurched and scraped through the stony soil (we had just cleaned out the creek) and I struggled with the handles to keep it going straight. The traces clinked and the horses' backs glistened in light from above.

*Eternal father who shall look into thy secret will,
Who but the Son shall take that book and open every seal?*

I finished ploughing before the rain came.

* * * * *

Johann Guenther's wife from British Honduras taught us another tune for *Ich will streben nach dem Leben, wo ich selig bin. Ich will ringen, einzudringen, bis daß ich's gewinn. Hält mann mich so lauf ich fort, bin ich matt so ruft das Wort. Fortgerungen, durchgedrungen, bis zum Kleinod hin!* (I will strive for life and blessing. I will struggle to enter in, until I attain it. If anyone holds me back I will break away. If I get weary I will follow the call. Onward struggling, forcing through, until the prize is mine!)

It was a strange sad tune and for more than a year I kept my resolve to sing *Ich will streben* every day.

* * * * *

On paper, clear and white like the parchment of Gutenberg's Bible, the printed woodcuts of Johann Arndt's *Wahres Christentum* held me transfixed. On Sundays at home, upstairs, I looked at its pictures and read:

"This is a fig tree. It grows from a bitter root. Its bark and leaves have a dreadful taste. But its fruits are delicious. So is repentance. It is a bitter experience. But it bears the delicious fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, godly comfort and many others. The one who rejects the tree will never taste its fruits."

"This is the sun, rising on a new day. It is the same sun that went down and disappeared last night. So the true Christian goes down and is buried before he rises to shine again in resplendent light."

"This is a cannon ball. It sits perfectly balanced, and comfortably, in any position. Only the tiniest part of it touches the earth. So it is with the true Christian. No matter where he comes to rest he keeps his balance. Contact with the earth is his smallest concern and he lives surrounded by things above."

"This is a magnifying glass. Sunlight shining through the lens sets the wood on fire. So the love of God shines through the lens of the true Christian's faith to set his soul aflame. But the man without faith remains dead and cold."

"This is a sun dial. The sun shines on it. The numbers are there. But it tells us nothing because its most important part, the pointer, is missing. So is the man who has faith before God, but no good works to point to his faith. Faith without works is dead."

“This is a bee hive. All the bees work as fast as they can. But no bee works for itself. Every bee works for the hive and all work for the man who owns them. So the true Christian lives and works for the brotherhood, and the whole brotherhood lives and works for Christ. The true Christian, dead to self, can no longer live selfishly.”

“This is a pile of green, sappy, wood. It burns slowly, making much smoke and little light. But when the green wood dries and the fire takes over, the smoke diminishes and light breaks out. So it is with the new Christian. As long as the Spirit’s fire struggles with the old sap of the flesh his testimony remains dim. But when the Spirit overcomes the flesh, the heat and light of his testimony shine.”

“This is an orange tree growing in a box. During the winter, men carry it inside to protect it from wind, frost, and snow. Sheltered from the elements it bears sweet-smelling flowers and fruit. So it is with the true Christian. Only if he keeps himself from the world, and in the warmth and shelter of the favour of God does he grow and become fruitful.”

“This is a printing press. A clean sheet of paper lies in it. One can read nothing on the paper because it has not yet received the impression. So it is with the one who says he believes in Christ but who has not yet received the impression of the cross. Only after a believer denies himself and comes under the cross does he receive the impression of Christ. Only then does he begin to look and act like Christ. Only then is he a true Christian ready to be sent out for all the world to read.”

Johann Arndt’s pictures and lessons stayed with me.

* * * * *

A sharp wind lifted the snow and stuck it onto bare maple trees along Erb Street. Cars passed in salted slush. But I turned my hat to the wind and walked to where David Eby’s meetinghouse had stood on Hallman Road. They buried Elias Schneider there, beside his wife Hannah Bingeman, in 1890. Across the corner, renters lived in what had been

Maurice Hallman's house. The barn was already down. I left tracks in the dead grass and snow and it was too cold to stay long.

* * * * *

My great-uncle Samuel Horst and Aunt Hannah lived down a steep lane, above a mill pond at Crystal Springs, east of Hawkesville. They had sheep.

On a fall day, already overcast and turning colder, I visited them with Mom and Dad. No one else came so I wandered about the place alone.

Upstairs in the wagon shed, up from the dust and grease where the buggies sat, they had put their apples. Bushels of Sweet-apples and Spies sat huddled in the unpainted room from which two windows faced south. Tacked-up cardboard covered its sloping ceiling and walls.

* * * * *

Where the seventh line comes down from high plains, east of Crosshill, a huddle of weathered markers stood in a fence corner. Tall grass nearly hid them behind a broken down rusted gate. Over a hundred years ago Mennonites had planned to build a meeting-house here, but their settlement died out.

"Joseph Frey, 1863-1865. This lovely flower to us a while was given. Transplanted now it brightly blooms in heaven."

* * * * *

We cannot help it. No matter how deeply we repent, innocence dies. We leave it behind and ride into life, beautifully strange and terrible though it be.

* * * * *

John Sherks helped us with our butchering in the spring. Two days later I went up with a team of light horses to fetch the meat. In my winter boots and overcoat, they transported me, standing on a flat sleigh, up the 13'th line between fields of melting snow:

Majestic sweetness sits enthroned upon my Saviour's brow,
 His head with radiant glories crowned, his lips with grace o'erflow. . . .

The sun shone through the haze and I sang in my heart to His Majesty—dark red and glorious on his throne—on my way up the thirteenth line.

4

Night

After 1974 our family (and many others) no longer attended Orthodox Mennonite meetings. One of my brothers and a sister found their way back into the group after it reorganised at a different place, years later. But the rest of us joined more acculturated Mennonite churches. In 1978 I began to teach school at Fort Stewart, Ontario. Three years later I married a girl of Old Colony Mennonite background and moved to Chihuahua, Mexico.

With Bert, our part Hackney mare, my two sisters and I headed west on a Sunday when we had no meeting and the young people gathered at William Martins. West through Peel and Maryboro we drove, where hydro wires hung on bare poles along the gravelled road. Little farmhouses sat far apart. The lake at Glen Allen lay slate grey beneath an overcast sky.

Out of the wind, behind a patch of woods where we tied our horse, we found the ruins of a Wesleyan church. Its carved headstone lay among brambles under the trees.

Late for dinner, but served never-the-less, we arrived at William Martins. Everyone sat around the room and listened to where we had been. Some older single girls sat on the couch and *Holz*kist beside the range. It was dark in the kitchen with its varnished wainscoting.

* * * * *

After school let out and I brought my students home, I walked the Fort Stewart hills. Up from the creek to where the family I stayed with took their cattle to drink, I climbed wooded heights, through pastures and over rail fences, to another farm.

The McDirmid house and log barn stood empty. From a rock behind them I looked far out across the Fraser and St.-Jean-Baptiste Lakes, and range upon range of blue hills.

* * * * *

In spite of snow and much traffic coming out of the city (it was not long before Christmas) I managed to return from Kitchener in time for prayer meeting at the Hesson Conservative Mennonite church. At Tralee I picked up my girlfriend, Susan Krahn. She had never seen me wear a hat before and liked it. Inside my little car it was warm and clean and we listened to a Mennonite Brethren quartet from St. Catharines, Ontario, singing to bright piano music: *Keiner wird zu schanden, welcher Gottes harrt, Sollt ich sein der erste, der zu schanden ward?*

We left the car in the church parking lot, where people carrying Bibles hurried in through the fast falling snow.

* * * * *

On our way to Mexico where we would live, we spent a weekend in Kansas. The wheat had barely started to turn. The sun had come out after a rainy morning in the Holdeman Mennonite meetinghouse at Lone Tree. In the afternoon a balmy wind blew in across

the fields and from the balcony in the Alexanderwohl church, built by immigrants from Russia, we looked down on many rows of benches. That night, at Winfield Fretz's place in Newton, it rained.

* * * * *

My parents-in-law lived between Blumenort and Gnadenfeld, along the highway. After the noon meal on the Lord's day, while they rested and the sun streamed through large south and west windows into their living room, we put on a record. Cana lilies bloomed bright orange outside and thunderclouds gathered over the Mennonite colony:

All night the men had laboured, with nets out on the sea,
 But empty ships were anchored alone on Galilee,
 Discouraged, tired and weary, no fruit for labours reaped,
 When lo a word was spoken, "Launch out into the deep!"

Launch out into the deep! No foe can e'er dismay,
 His grace will surely keep, if you trust him and obey!

"In vain O Lord thou speakest, no fish are in the sea,
 Yet once more at thy bidding we'll cast the net for thee!"
 What mighty pow'r is working, the nets are filled and break,
 How glad that they obeyed him, just for his own word's sake!

Let down your faith my brother, into the mighty deep,
 Of God's eternal promise, His word he'll surely keep,
 Ask him for every blessing no good will he withhold,
 He'll give in more abundance than your frail bark can hold.

Launch out into the deep! No foe can e'er dismay,
 His grace will surely keep, if you trust him and obey!

* * * * *

Up from Cholula the road got worse. Patches of corn and beans clung to the mountain before we entered clouds and a forest of dark trees draped in Spanish moss. Occasional Indian men on foot or horseback assured us we were headed the right way. But it got so bad we all had to walk except the driver, and one of us needed to go on ahead to steer him safely over rocks and a gully washed down the centre of the road.

Occasional glimpses through the clouds gave us aerial views of the valley of Puebla, below. First fog, then drizzle, an Indian village of stone houses clustered around muddy streets—we no longer knew where we were, but the strange road led higher.

Trees grew sparse and we emerged suddenly onto the páramo. To our left the slope continued up into the fog and looming above us, snow. The road had taken across Popocatepetl.

* * * * *

To grow and change delights us. We want to change until it dawns on us that we have lived all our lives in a cocoon. Then the thought of ongoing change becomes frightful.

With the long threads of our imaginations—fantasies about human experience, the truth, and God—we have wrapped ourselves up tightly. But when those threads begin to break we cannot help it. No matter how much it hurts to see, our cocoons tear open to leave us standing, dripping and ashamed, before him.

* * * * *

Nights in the dry season turned dark and cold on the Páramo de Morelos.

Out of corrugated tar paper, nailed on with bottle caps from the village cantina, we had built an addition onto our house. We had lined its walls with cheap pressed-board, and Susan hung curtains, now drawn, over its windows. A kerosene lamp stood on my desk

and she curled up on the couch to read. Its light came through a window we had taken out, into the kitchen where our cook stove stood against the wall. There, and in the friendly shadows of our back room where a quilt from Canada lay on our bed, everything was quiet and clean—Saturday night—and I read a traveller's account from the 1890s, about Spain.

* * * * *

A dirt road disappeared into the desert south of Coyamé. Deep shadows to its left hid a *vado* (a dry wash) under jagged peaks in the morning sun. A man walked there. But for the birds in the mezquite, and for us rumbling along in a dusty pickup, he was alone on the road to Cuchillo Parado.

* * * * *

On a rare wet day in winter, when clouds hung on the peaks of the Sierra Madre, I headed back a dirt road through the Rancho de la Cruz. Adobe ruins sat among prickly pear cactus at the railroad tracks. From them I found a wagon trail—used by villagers to get firewood—up into the mountains. Wet chaparral, gnarled encinos in the misty rain, hid my truck from villages far down on the plains. Papanes (Mexican jays) flitted about in their leaves.

* * * * *

God, once dimly perceived, is not at all like we expected. He is Yahshua, a young man with a beard. Beyond that we know nothing but what he is not.

* * * * *

Day after day I worked on our fields lying on a great slope of land up from the adobe houses and alamos of the Mexican village. In rock breaks a few *táscates* grew. But the nearest ranches were specks in the distance and wagon trails lost themselves on the far reaches of the plain. Susan and I hoed beans and spread our fertiliser by hand.

* * * * *

Before Franz and the girls came in for breakfast, I climbed Susan's uncle Johann Reddecopp's windmill in the Durango village of Rosenort. The sky, east over the lake of Santiaguillo, was flaming red and pink. Long tailed blackbirds—*Sprees* we called them in German—flitted about in eucalyptus trees. Throughout the village mourning doves called.

Down on the yard, swept white with a broom, Susan's uncle Johann watered his horse at a trough beside the stable door.

* * * * *

Because Yahshua is the Christ he can be silent with us. Because we believe in him we can be silent with him too.

* * * * *

Light snow touched the chapparal and dry cornfields with white, up behind Napavéhic. The mountains around us stood with their peaks lost in fog. When we got to crumbling adobe houses, some still inhabited, at Napavéhic de Arriba for services, Doña Francisca took us into their best room.

The beams and earthen ceilings of much of the house, once surrounding a courtyard, had fallen in. But this one could still be kept warm. More light than usual, because of the snow, came in through its one small window in whitewashed walls. With Doña Marcelina and her children, Emiliano who had suffered brain damage in a car accident in the U.S., Pancho Nieto, Rafael and Rosa Gómez, Doña Isabel, Roberto Gómez's wife, Beatriz Antiveros who had heart trouble, Arminda Venzor, and Doña Librada Mesa, a white-haired woman with a deeply wrinkled face and hands, we sat on wooden benches. Boys and girls in what had been brightly coloured sweaters and dirty jeans sat on the floor

and along the walls. On this snowy day Doña Francisca made a fire on the open hearth of their best room.

* * * * *

As long as we lived in the cocoon of our imaginations we could have “God” doing whatever we liked. We could have him making us glad, convicting us, or blessing us with great evangelical power. But once we stand before him we are helpless. He may overpower us with his presence. He may just be there and we can see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing of him. All we can do is stand before him as he is.

* * * * *

My soul cries out, Oh Lord how long,
Till my toiling ends and you call me home. . . .

I hurried to finish hoeing the last of our beans on red soil, high above the wash that cut through our land at La Jarita, before leaving for Guatemala with Susan and Fernando Guerra in 1982. We travelled by bus through Mexico City, Veracruz, and Oaxaca, to Central America.

“Is that the lights of home I see,
Do I feel a breeze from the crystal sea?
Is that the Lord standing high on heaven’s balcony?
If it’s the lights of home, it’s a welcome sight to me.”

* * * * *

Evening came upon us before the stone aqueduct at Querétaro and the tiled domes of the church at Jaureguí. Patchy wheat fields stood ripe to harvest among stone fences and maguey. A small boy on horseback brought in the goats at Coyotepec, the setting sun shining through a cloud of dust raised by their pattering hooves.

San Juan del Río, Tlalnepantla, Ecatepec, Izcalli—ever increasing traffic into Atzacapotzalco and the Valley of Mexico. Old towns huddled around churches and monasteries transfixed in the roar of Latin America’s densest traffic and ahuehuete trees under neon lights.

* * * * *

Before we know what happens they stay behind—the images of our childhood, our childish songs, prayers, and rules. We loved them for as long as they lasted. But in the strange night and traffic we leave them behind. Then we know God is not who we thought he was, nor found where we thought him to be.

They go, the structures we trusted in. We watch them disintegrate and realise they were not what we thought them either. Should we feel sorry? Everything that goes, tugs on the next in line. We think only reality has stayed with us. Then it goes too and we reach for another “reality.”

* * * * *

We visited Susan’s cousins, Hein Wieben at Rosenfeld on the Nuevo Ideal colony, in the afternoon. He took time off from work, in his overalls, to sit in the back bedroom to talk. Dark green shades kept out the sun and a hot wind that wilted the fruit trees they had planted on their flat white garden outside.

We ate sunflower seeds while we talked and water ran through the irrigation ditches.

* * * * *

For so long we thought we had to know. We felt pressured to “know God” in big and bold ways, to know the Bible with its correct interpretations, and to know that we were

saved. But great relief comes from not having to know—from seeing nothing on earth or in the heavens but what God clearly reveals, and letting the rest be mysterious.

* * * * *

All our lives we knew—deep inside—that we do not know very much. All our lives we learned that there is much we cannot learn, and we became sure that of most things we cannot be sure. We come into great peace by admitting this, and at first, trouble.

Not knowing, not being able to know, *not having to know*—at first we are left in a day of light on an ocean without water, without horizons, and without limits of height or depth. The ocean of *not knowing* and *not having to know* sweeps away the house of the soul, together with its foundations, and search for it as we will, we never find its place again. We fall into the ocean of *not knowing* and find in it anguish unlimited.

For Jonah there was a whale. But for us, with nothing beneath and falling, how we repent! How we reach out for whatever might be real!

In that moment, with the foundation of human “knowledge” swept from beneath us, we may pass—should that be our desire—from useless imagination to sure faith. We may let Yahshua, the young Jew, be who he is (and not be who he is not). Then, like Peter rising from the waves, we may walk with him across the sea.

* * * * *

West of Páramo, in the valley of the Río Papigóchic, lay Jesuit mission towns. Farmers had stooked their grain, and the corn stood dry around them—Santo Tomás, Jesús Lugo, Matachic—the evening I stopped at Tejolócachic.

A door opened into the high wood-roofed auditorium of its mission church. Gilded decor glowed in the dim light from a window beside the altar. But it was almost too dark to see

the stations of the cross. I climbed steps into the tower and stood overlooking the village from arched openings around the bell.

¡Señor Jesucristo, ten piedad de nosotros, pecadores!

Little houses with stick fences and goats. Smoke curled from kitchens under tile and scraps of tin. Children played in the last light of evening and it looked for frost, at Tejolócachic.

* * * * *

My father was at our place, at high noon on the Páramo, when the village cattle came out. We chased them back in the heat and light. Back onto the bare pasture. With my hammer and pliers I repaired the fence at the gate, where barbed wires strung on little twisted posts disappeared into the far distance across the plains.

* * * * *

By late afternoon we began to emerge from the Sierra Madre, under heavy clouds, on the train from Chihuahua to Sinaloa states. My sister and I stood in a doorway, the top half open, to feel tropical air coming up from the canyons to meet us. The yellow roots of Tescalama trees stuck like gum to sheer rock walls. Poinsettias stood in full bloom and Indian children, at Témoris, sold fruits. Our engines pulled us around curve after curve, through tunnels and thundering across bridges, hundreds of feet above the water.

Down in the bottom we saw the village of Jesús Cruz. Its whitewashed Catholic church stood among a few houses and green fields on the valley floor. The clouds broke and the sun shone on Jesús Cruz.

* * * * *

On my way back from picking rocks on my father-in-law's land between Agua Caliente and Pedernales, I stopped in the bed of a dry gulch. A weeping willow stood there. The mid-day sun lay hot on northern Mexico. But under the willow tree, on the sand, I found sweet-scented shade and rest.

* * * * *

The collapse of our imagination leaves us with nothing—yet everything. “The things that are not bring to nought the things that are.”¹

True nothingness, they said long ago, is the hole at the centre of the hub around which everything revolves.

“Null,” my father-in-law calls it in German. “Naught,” my father who learned his arithmetic in British Empire days, says. It is not. . . . It is not. . . . It is not. . . . An old man in India spoke simply of zero. Yet life, like mathematics, begins there.

* * * * *

It is not peace. Yet with zero hatred, zero anger, zero revenge, the beautiful dove of peace alights on us.

It is not thankfulness. Yet with zero desires and zero complaints, we become unspeakably thankful.

It is not love. Yet with zero hatred, fountains of love break open within and around us.

It is not community. Yet with zero selfishness, we find ourselves in community before we know it.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:28

It is not equality. Yet with zero competition we have what everyone else has, and they have what is ours.

It is not freedom. Yet with zero oppression, zero limits we place on one another, we are free.

It is not pacifism or non-violence. Yet with zero aggression, violence disappears. Not quietness, yet zero distraction. Not purity, yet zero lust. Not detachment, yet zero affection for what passes away with time. Not reality, yet zero imagination, and all we have left is the Infinite. The Ineffable. Not nameless, but above every name. The one that walked among us as a young Jewish man with a beard.

There are no limits to what we do not know about him. Yet we love him because he first loved us.

* * * * *

Our vehicle broke down four hours south of Creel, on the dirt road. Two girls and I stayed with it, while the others hitch-hiked out of the canyon for help.

A log building stood beside a bridge, high above the water at Basíhuare where we stayed. Canyon walls towered above us on every side. The women who lived there made our meals by lamplight. Pigs shuffled about. Chickens roosted on the beams above the stove. They brought their water in a bucket from the river and set it on the floor.

The girls slept in the vehicle that night and I lay on its roof, wrapped in a dusty sheet beneath the stars. The river's roar never ends at Basíhuare.

* * * * *

We have no reason to declare it other than what it is. If we cannot see, we may as well admit it. The One we love is “not far from any one of us.” In the friendly night (not physical darkness, but the “night” of not seeing and not knowing him) we may wait until he comes to us in unobstructed light. This is *wahre Gelassenheit* (true detachment).

We are not transformed until we stand in the pain of our own wretchedness and inability to comprehend the infinite—before him. Only then can we believe in him as he is. Only then are we willing to let him give us what he wants.

* * * * *

Sunday morning sun and birds. A friend, Grace Mast, had travelled with us and carried our baby into the Catholic church on top of the hill at Topolobampo, Sinaloa. Only one woman, cleaning the floor, was there. All the windows stood wide open. Down from the church on precipitous streets the town hung above the water’s edge. Clear blue and shining in the light, the Pacific Ocean lay around us and out as far as we could see.

* * * * *

With a mule and an old man, Ramón Chaparro, we walked three hours up from Batopilas on a mountain trail during Holy Week. All day long we had visited with his relatives and friends far up the canyon. We had forded creeks and climbed rocky heights. But now, at nightfall, we were back in town where kerosene lamps glowed in open doorways under mango trees. The scent of orange blossoms perfumed the air and hoof beats clattered up and down its cobblestone streets.

I was tired—too tired to do anything but lie in bed and watch flickering shadows among hand hewn beams high overhead. Our posada was several centuries old. A tin can of oil with a wick was the lamp beside my bed.

Every fifteen minutes the town clock chimed in the plaza. Between it and the deep roar of the river, rushing down the canyon, I heard the happy sounds of children playing

(they had hung a piñata from a mango tree) and the priest's melodious voice as he lead the people in evening prayers.

5

Further Away

In 1984 I was ordained a minister for a German Mennonite congregation in the village of Gnadenfeld, in Chihuahua. We also became involved in Spanish-language "missions" and publishing work. This took us to many churches in Central and South America. I taught at a Bible School in the United States, and we lived for a year in New Mexico. Then, in 1989 we moved to Costa Rica.

Up stone steps behind the *Mennoheim* we did our laundry in a tub from where one looks out over the mouldy time-worn city of Asunción. Susan did not feel well. It rained off and on. Around long tables in the dining hall we ate mandioca with Zweiback. Roads to the interior of Paraguay were closed, and we rumbled downtown in a bright yellow trolley where I read seventeenth century Jesuit mission accounts in the university library.

* * * * *

Its diesel motor roaring as we picked up speed between giant potholes in the hot night, our bus wove its way from Paso del Toro to Cosamaloapan. Palm fronds, hanging low, swept the side of the bus. We had our windows wide open.

Tropical smells and sounds came to us on the isthmus of Tehuantepec. Behind the thatched roofed building where we stopped, the darkness was soft and deep. Temples stood among the trees. I heard insects and in the distance, people talking.

* * * * *

On a white dusty road through cane fields east of Orange Walk, several hours of slow driving in the heat brought us to Little Belize Colony. We found the farm of Prediger Jakob Wiens, and his widowed father, Peter, who had moved there from Mexico.

Prediger Wiens walked slowly out from the shed where he was working with his boys. He wore a black shirt and overalls, and a wide straw hat shaded him from the tropical sun. A wagon stood under the trees. Everything on the Hof spoke of industry and peace. The boys came to look at us. They did not say anything.

* * * * *

The most powerful comment on what goes on in the world has always been silence.

* * * * *

Small waves, too gentle to have made a beach, lapped the shore at Stann Creek Town. Sitting in the heat, among driftwood and coconuts, I looked out across the reef and watched a boat drifting slowly seaward.

Garifuna people (of Caribbean Indian and African descent) live at Stann Creek. I read about them in a social studies book, Longman Caribbean, in a little wooden house among orange trees at the Mennonite mission.

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From Caaguazú we drove west and south, into the grasslands and cattle country of Paraguay. A long bridge at Río Florido, a funeral procession at Paraguaná. San Ignacio Misiones on a red brick road toward Jesuit communities now in ruins. All night we drove under the southern cross, Susan and I in the open box of a Mennonite colonist's pickup, with several bushels of tangarines.

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Silence—of all luxuries the most useful.

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Rain beat on Boca del Río, Veracruz, on a Sunday night when we stayed there with my sister and parents-in-law. We pulled the drapes on great black windows in our suite, and got our Bibles out for “meeting.”

Twilight is stealing over the sea,
 Shadows are falling soft on the lea.
 Borne on the night winds voices of yore,
 Come from the far-off shore.

The sound of traffic rushing past on a wet highway muffled the roar of surf (the sea was wild) and a woman interrupted our meeting to sell us baked things.

Voices of loved ones, songs of the past,
 Still linger round me, while life shall last.
 Lonely I wander, sadly I roam,
 Seeking that far-off home.

After the rain stopped we walked out onto the beach. Watery lights blinked across the bay where Sir Francis Drake and Captain John Hawkins fought the Spanish in 1569. The moon rode through a storm-tossed sky. It was warm and dark and I almost stepped on a dead dog.

Far away, beyond the starlit skies,
 Where the love light never, never dies,
 Gleameth a mansion filled with delight,
 Sweet happy home so bright.

* * * * *

The Zócalo, in Mexico City, lay nearly empty. Streetlights lit the Viceregal Palace with sentries, stiff at colonial doors, and the ruins of Huitzilopochtli on Sunday night. Alone, I slipped through cast iron gates and into the patio of the Cathedral. In among its left wings, on flagstones down in the shadows, I looked up and saw a bare light bulb hanging in a room above the baptistery. It was the only light still shining in the cathedral.

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Lights in the jungle, tiny spots glowing red on the inky vastness of southern Venezuela and Brazil. Portuguese rock music pulsating in our ears, we looked down from our plane at midnight and wondered who sat around those fires.

* * * * *

It rained the day we left Batopilas. No one offered to come with me when we stopped at the ruins of the Hacienda San Miguel in the bottom of the canyon.

An iron gate, still padlocked, survived. But walls around the estate had fallen down. I picked my way through underbrush in the courtyard into silent buildings. Roofs had collapsed, second and third storey floors hung from rotten beams. A long mess hall, the machine rooms, the offices—everything the Alexander Shepherd family had built before revolution drove them from their silver mining estate three days on mule back into the bottom of an isolated canyon—sat ruined in the gentle rain.

Above the river a sprig of hibiscus bloomed.

* * * * *

God—Yahshua, the Christ—may be be silent with us, or otherwise. We may be silent with him too.

* * * * *

With Christopher, our first adopted child (his mother came from Escuinapa, Sinaloa, his father from Guadalajara) we crossed a sandy yard under giant cacti and desert flowers. The inside of the San Xavier del Bac mission, built by the Spanish in Arizona in 1700, was cool and smelled of candle wax. I dipped my fingers into the water of a stone font by the door.

* * * * *

Eventually we just let Christ be Christ and the sweet evidence of his love may bring our souls, like cactus flowers, to bloom.

* * * * *

All day we had hugged the Oaxaca coast on a road, not all of it paved, snaking like a loose rope through Indian villages above the sea. Just before sundown we stopped our school bus, loaded with all our belongings, where two houses stood with thatched pyramid roofs. Except for a shy family fishing we saw no one where wild surf crashed onto the beach, empty as far as one could see in both directions. Salty mist blurred the palm trees and mountains behind us.

* * * * *

Tepecuacuilco—I gave the Mexican name to a patch of yard that hung from our house to the road, in La Estrella Colony. On a Saturday forenoon, during most of which it rained lightly, I dug the last of its pineapple plants and smoothed it out with a shovel and rake. I planted fruit trees and flowers and hauled the refuse off in a wheelbarrow. The sun shone weakly, between rains, from a yellowish sky.

* * * * *

We bought the floor tiles for our new Costa Rican house in San José. Eldon Dueck and I fetched them with his English Ford truck. It took us hours, descending a winding road down the northern slope of Volcán Poás to La Estrella on the Caribbean lowlands.

We unloaded the tiles on a rise beside the forest where our new house stood, still without windows. Insects hummed and chirped. *Cuyeos* (night birds) called one another, sharp and clear in the light of the moon, and we talked German.

* * * * *

A creek cut through the rain forest behind our house. On its far side, under the vine-draped canopy of giant ceiba trees, our cacao grew in the shade.

With a knapsack sprayer on my back, I made my way from tree to tree in the dim light, applying fertilizer, and with a machete I freed the trees from vines that would have strangled them. Fluorescent turquoise butterflies floated through patches of light above the water where Alvin Loewen, a colonist that had moved away, had built a dam. Jewel frogs lived under tree ferns and giant tiger-paw bromeliads around it.

* * * * *

The day I made beds from sheets of plywood and painted our bedroom walls, Susan caught a ride home from town with Ramón Schwartzentruber driving his father's cattle truck. Pastures shone green in the afternoon sun at La Estrella. We lived on the dirt road next to our white frame meetinghouse surrounded by palm and citrus trees.

* * * * *

The children played. Susan put away the dishes. Rain kept pounding on our bare tin roof and running from porches on all sides around us. It had rained all day. It still rained after dark and we heard the rivers roaring. With the lights on in our house high above

the road, too much water and mud to expect company, and a long evening before us, I read *Kon Tiki*.

Earth and time become very small before the Infinite.

* * * * *

We lost the first child that would have been born to us. After ten years of waiting, that prospect of seeing our family grow by natural increase ended at the Clínica Bíblica in San José. It rained the whole way up to the hospital. Susan had an operation that night. But in her room on the second floor—off a balcony around an enclosed courtyard—they had hung a frame with the verse: “*Sáname, oh Jehová, y seré sano; sálvame, y seré salvo; porque tu eres mi alabanza*” (*Jeremías 17:14*). I stood by a window in her bare, wood-floored room and watched the traffic.

* * * * *

With our preschooler’s hand in mine we walked to Diedrich Friesens, our neighbours, after dark for milk. Cows moved about in the pasture, dark shapes where fireflies blinked in front of woods along the creek.

Racing clouds from the Caribbean covered a shining moon. “*Tonto, ¿me asustas!*” two boys on bicycles startled by our flashlight rolled on silent tires into the night.

* * * * *

Silence, when it comes, may trouble us at first. For so long we have heard that passivity and “quietism” are great evils. For us to be *die Stille im Lande* (the quiet in the land) earns us no end of criticism from more progressive and active Christians. But there is a great misunderstanding.

The Spirit of Christ only begins to stir within us after we lay our lives, with their ceaseless striving and running after this or that, down. *“Hier legt mein Sinn sich vor dir nieder mein Geist sucht seinen Ursprung wieder,”* my older sisters used to sing. *“Du wollest Jesu, meinen Willen mit der Gelassenheit erfüllen. Brich der Natur Gewalt entzwei und mache meinen Willen frei!”* (Whatever I think or am inside, I throw down before you, and my spirit discovers its source in you again. . . . May you, Jesus, transform my will with surrender, detachment, a complete letting go. Break the power of human nature for my will to come free!)

* * * * *

In very small and very humble places one comes upon great freedom.

* * * * *

A doorkeeper hurried out with an umbrella for Susan and the baby at the Lubavitcher synagogue in Rohrmoser (a suburb of San José). It had rained and thundered for hours and turned very dark. But Hersch Spalter, the rabbi, met us in the hall. Inside the brightly-lit synagogue it was clean and dry. Susan sat behind ivy-covered latticework.

* * * * *

After we moved to the Pacific Coast we planted coffee on a steep slope down from our house. Men from the village helped me dig contour drainage ditches and plant porró trees among them for shade.

During the first big rain after we dug the ditches I stood among them, holding an umbrella. All the ditches were full. Little coffee plants stood dark green in the pelting rain. High above me, on our porch overlooking the sea, Susan baked tortillas over a fire in the fogón .

* * * * *

Only when we become passive to the passing world (the world, not the earth) may the passion for what is real and eternal overtake us. Only then may we become living dancing growing singing children of our Father in Heaven—brothers and sisters of the moist wind, of thundering surf at night, and the music of the cosmos in galaxies whirling around us. Our worldly (not earthly) activity must end for the heavenly to break upon us.

* * * * *

Low clouds almost touched the trees of the rain forest, wet, graceful, and emerald green, in the waning light of Sunday afternoon.

Up a muddy trail I had come to Lubaantún by myself, in a mission vehicle. Suddenly they stood before me—its Mayan temples—looming above the rain forest on the crown of a low hill.

No one else was there.

Rectangular pyramids, stone block walls, and verdant courtyards under Kahoon trees—many centuries of southern Belize's rain had softened their geometric grandeur. I moved from court to court among the ruins. Bay leaf palms sprouted from crumbling stairways. Water dripped from the trees. Temples only partially uncovered sank into deep and dark greenery on every side—lush, powerful, straining to choke out the weak light from above.

On a flat place between the temples I lifted my hands.

6

Poor

In Costa Rica we became part of a new church planting effort of the former “Kleingemeinde” congregation we joined. Three thousand eight hundred feet above the Pacific, we built a house overlooking the entire Gulf of Nicoya, the coastal lowlands at Puntarenas, range upon range of blue mountains alongside and beneath us, and the open sea. But the new work did not survive. We moved to the city of Cartago where I taught at a language institute, and later in a Roman Catholic school.

Heavy foliage covered the trail Tomás and I took to his milpa at Crique Jute in southern Belize. In dim light under the vines I followed him, machete in a sheath swinging from his belt, and carrying bags for the corn we were to pick. In quick strokes, machete pinging on bare wood, he cut and peeled the bark from a stick. “Strong,” he said, “for mecapal.”

The corn in his slash-and-burn plot had grown amazingly tall. We broke it at arm’s height to bring the cobs down within reach. Cob after cob. Wet earth among fallen trunks and ashes in the rain. With nimble hands the K’ekchí Indian knotted the bark and showed me how to toss it over my head, around the bag, and let it balance the weight of the corn on my back.

He did not talk much. Spanish was his second language. But every time I looked at him he flashed me a wide smile. No doubt I was the first “gringo” with whom he had gathered corn.

* * * * *

Rain, on the vast tin roof of the east end bus station in Caracas, Venezuela, roared intermittently through the night. All the shops had closed. A cold draft blew in from the east and a beggar in a wheel chair asked me to help get her pieces of cardboard onto seats in a sheltered corner by a telephone that did not work. She lifted herself from her chair and lay down gratefully, covering herself with a piece of plastic.

“¡*Muchas gracias!*” she smiled at me, tucking her bag under her head for a pillow. She would not have been able to wash her sweater and skirts.

I shared my own row of back-to-back seats with a soldier in green camouflage that lay on their other side. He had pulled his cap over his face. Under the neon light of the station I could see his hands moving from time to time and knew he was not sleeping soundly. Perhaps the rain bothered him. I looked at his strong, young hands. His ancestors came from Africa.

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In poverty we may discover the Way.

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True poverty—finding ourselves truly on the level of all our brothers and sisters—is something we choose. At least something we choose to own up to. It is *wahre Gelassenheit*, the last stage of “letting go,” surrender, detachment, or however that term may be understood.

* * * * *

Some of our neighbours believe that only thieves and *craqueros* (crack addicts) live on the dikes.

Thirty years ago a mudslide from the Irazú volcano wiped out a major part of our city of Cartago, in Costa Rica. Now the dikes stand to protect us from future catastrophe. But they have become populated. Squatters have built on them.

In the dry season I began to take a shortcut along the west dike to catch my bus to work. Early in the morning, I watch my step. There are round dark spots, and freshly scuffed patches on the dirt street.

Salvadorean and Nicaraguan people, refugees from their civil wars, live along the dikes. They walk warily and in silence. This morning I met a woman and greeted her. She cringed. But on second glance she returned the greeting, “¡Buenos Dias, muchacho!” and I caught in its warmth a sigh of relief. She had seen me before.

A clump of sugar cane, a papaya plant, a ripening hanger of bananas among the rusted tin and scraps of plastic and lumber in which they live—surely humanity has not died on the dike. Black string zigzagging from house to post to ramshackle wall is one woman’s clothes’ line. Others drape it on barbed wire or hang it on walls of scrap.

Inside one small house (the street is narrow and its walls are not soundproof) I hear the scraping of a bowl in a cement sink and the splashing sounds of someone having a bath. In another one I hear a pan sizzling on an open fire. Through an open doorway I see two boys pounding rice in a mortar—boom, boom—before they leave for work, for the street, or perhaps for school. On both sides of the street I hear people talk in low voices. A young man comes out and stands beside his house. He glances at me and waits until I am gone.

Two hens among the dirt call their half-grown chicks. A rooster with no feathers on his neck, crows.

“*Bien fre'quito hoy,*” (it is cool this morning) a man carrying a jar of milk, greets me in a brotherly way. Dogs sleep on the street. They are skin and bones. One is wounded and mangy. Detergent foams up from a grey drainage ditch between the dike and the backside of San Nicolás de Taras. I meet a boy on a bike. I meet him every morning. He has his cap pulled down hard and concentrates on steering his bike around rocks and mud holes on the street. He has serious impetigo around his mouth and kicks at the mangy dog rushing to bark at his wheels.

On the wall of a house (one calls them houses—*casas*—not *tugurios*) someone has neatly, laboriously, misspelled the words, “*No votar vasura, por favor, el comite*” (Do not

dump garbage please, the committee.) On another house I read, *“Hay frescos, gelatina”* (soft drinks and popsicles), and on another one in purple spray paint: “Chapo Killer.” Two boys without shirts, smoking, sit on the floor of a house that has been torn down.

It is a foggy morning and we all stand in line, silently, to wait for the bus. When it comes I sit serious and at attention, like I did on the night of my ordination in Mexico. At the front of the bus, beside an icon of the Virgin, the driver has pasted a Playboy sticker. On my right, the bus has a broken window.

* * * * *

The third to last thing we let go, is our sense of accomplishment. We want to feel we have been busy, we have led a productive Christian life, we have done our job well. “Well done thou good and faithful servant!” are exactly the words we most want to hear. But we are unprofitable servants—a liability, not an asset, to Christ, and forced to beg for his mercy.

* * * * *

We stopped in Managua, Nicaragua, on Sunday evening and walked from the bus station toward the lake to find something to eat. Between a block wall and a ramshackle hotel we saw tables on a muddy lot under guanacaste trees. It had rained. A woman hustled us away from the hotel’s doorway to a table off to the side where the ground was not as wet.

A young man came and ate alone. A woman from the hotel sat down beside him. She was neither young nor pretty, but wore makeup and stylish clothes. I saw him say, “Hoy no,” with a smile.

Beside the door a middle-aged man, well dressed, beaming down at her as if he might have been her father, sat talking to a young girl. She was very young. And timid. She smiled fearfully back at him while leaning away from him on her chair.

The woman who took our money—she sat by the door and had an apron tied about her—wore no expression on her broad, plain face at all.

* * * * *

The second last thing we let go is imaginary status with God. No “great Christian,” saint, or missionary finds the Way.

Only beggars.

* * * * *

Reading the Sermon on the Mount we like to imagine ourselves poor, or hungry, or in need. But as long as we go around “having something to offer” we are salesmen, not beggars.

Salesmen get few handouts—like eternal life.

* * * * *

“Do they often fight at night?” I asked Luís Alonso.

“*Sí. ¿Cómo no?*” he answered in passing, without the slightest change of expression. Milk bucket in hand he had come in, a fourteen-year-old, from the corral.

For a long time, my friend Phil and I stood on a second storey patio, watching a battle on the mountains of Guasapa. The sun had gone down. Salvadorean troops, manning a Howitzer along the highway between Aguilares and Apopa were shelling the mountain—earth shaking booms resounding through villages of adobe, clay tile, and frightened chickens in mango trees.

A short while before, army helicopters flying in formation, had crossed at tree top level. Their side panels were out and we looked up into the barrels of guns pointed down on every side. Now they shot lights over the mountain. Guerrilla hideouts.

I remembered the boys we had seen unloading from an army truck at the front that morning. Teenagers, they got sent up the mountain as spies. How many still had both legs, and their eyes?

* * * * *

The last thing we let go is our voice. We feel it our right to tell others, insistently, what happens to us—both good or bad.

But truly poor and vulnerable we have no voice. We must simply wait until Yahshua, the Saviour, comes for us.

* * * * *

At the back of her flat yard in the Barrio Los Próceres, Sumintra Ramoutar appeared and greeted us. It had rained and the red yard was muddy. She had fruit trees. She stood in the open doorway of a corrugated tin house with no windows.

Sumintra had come to Ciudad Bolívar, Venezuela, as a refugee from Guyana. Her husband had died. Her braided hair had turned grey. In the dusky interior of her house we sat on rickety folding chairs. She kept her dishes on a board over two cement blocks.

Sumintra's house, even though she did ironing for the wealthy until her feet swelled and made it hard for her to stand, was clean. We picked a mango from a tree in her back yard.

* * * * *

In San Salvador, where the barrio of funeral homes disintegrates into a bad part of town, we sat on the sidewalk to wait on our pupusas. The smell of frying corn dough, chicharrones and verduras drifted up from where a woman made them over open coals. A boy, just out of the shower, lifted himself onto the hood of a red car. People ate and talked. Across the street two girls sat in the doorway of a tin-walled hotel. Under a misspelled sign—Hospdaje Camaguey—a grimy hallway done in pink water paint disappeared behind them.

The hotel's upstairs windows stood open, dark holes in the afternoon heat. The girls sat scowling at the garbage. One of them, overweight in white shorts, had a face that could have been my sister's.

* * * * *

Poverty is dreadful and fertile ground—seedbed of the Word.

* * * * *

We do not reach for Yahshua until we break through the crust of order and fall into the pit of inner chaos and need. Then we no longer care what we are or who he is. We just need him.

* * * * *

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now. . . . Blessed are you who weep. . . . Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil. . . . But woe to you who are rich. . . . Woe to you who are well fed. . . . Woe to you who laugh. . . . Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets” (Luke 6:20-26).

* * * * *

A thousand feet below our place, out past a gold mine hidden among the mountain's folds, lay Don Juventino Rodriguez's abandoned ranch. Don Juven, an old man and a widower (an alcoholic), lived in the town of Miramar and Yónatan, a boy from our congregation, and I took him to see what had been his farm on a Saturday forenoon.

On horseback, steeply down a winding trail from the dirt road, we took Don Juven. Fences had fallen into disrepair. Great sweeps of pasture, down through rocks and into distant, tree-lined gullies stood empty. Around a curve, through woods where trees met and birds sang among hanging bromeliads above the trail, we passed through the last barbed-wire gate to come upon what had been his barnyard.

A tiny plateau, just large enough for his buildings and yard, Don Juven's place sat on the face of the mountain. Away from it all land fell to sun-bathed coastal lowlands along the sea.

We tied our horse at the troja, a two storey granary built on one corner of a corral. Spring water still gurgled into a trough, cool under guanacaste trees in the shade. Tall palms and trees in patches of fallen fruit stood around the foundations of what had been his house.

* * * * *

We may pray with our eyes wide open. Poverty lets us see in creation what there is—and our Creator in what there is not.

* * * * *

Yahshua does not bind himself to place or time. Any place, if we are truly poor, may be the Holy Place through which we come to him.

In the Holy Place we may tell him about ourselves and others. We may think and learn. We may meditate. And believe. “He that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”

But we need not stay in the Holy Place. We may come to the veil.

* * * * *

The prayer of the blind man, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!” may open the veil for us. It may take us into the Most Holy Place.

* * * * *

Aaron saw the Most Holy Place once a year. Thanks to Yahshua, the Christ, we may see it all year.

* * * * *

Words, at the seat of mercy, fail. Descriptions become inadequate. Every attempt to tell others what we see when we “fix our eyes on the unseen” fall hopelessly short. Yet for thousands of years—hopeless shortcomings notwithstanding—those that have “seen it” have tried to tell others how to see it too.

It is a matter of position.

* * * * *

From the back of his wooden boat Luís Camareno steered us out of a mangrove swamp on the Gulf of Nicoya. The tide was in. We had to duck to glide beneath low-hanging branches. Through watery tunnels where birds flitted among tangled trunks and leaves we finally saw the afternoon light on the bay and the houses of Santa Eduwiges. They

were not painted. Fish nets hung from the posts on which they stood, above the water. We docked at one behind an outhouse on a long board walkway.

In Luis's house we sat on cord-bottomed chairs in a wooden room. He was an old man. Radio music drifted in from neighbours' houses down the sandy street. He had fished all his life.

* * * * *

Walking up the back way, through their cane fields, we came upon the Bernardo Mendez family making sugar at Zapotal. Just before sundown on the mountain, the oxen were making their last rounds at the press. Bernardo's wife and daughter were pushing in the canes. His son drove the oxen round and round under the low roof of the *trapiche* where banana plants crowded around piles of firewood. Beside great kettles in the lower part of the building, wooden molds stood ready to be filled with boiled-down syrup.

Shy at their work, the Mendez family would rather have smiled than talked. But Bernardo gave us a glass of freshly pressed cane juice to share, and pieces of hardened foam on leaves. Under a bamboo roof he kept the ox-cart with which they hauled the cane.

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Can one describe to a friend what that friend has never seen?

Only with great imperfection. Perhaps that is why most who have "seen" do not describe. And those that describe remain anonymous.

* * * * *

But Aaron's days are over. The court of the Gentiles stands full, and wonder of wonders, for those that come through the Holy Place there is a Way into that beyond the veil!

* * * * *

How dare I, in the presence of innumerable saints that have gone the Way before me, open my mouth? To be a guide I do not qualify. What lies beyond the veil is another country. They speak another language there. You must discover it yourself.

But for now, like the lepers that stumbled on the Syrians' abandoned camp, I believe I might sin if I did not make sure you knew of its existence.

* * * * *

We know we have passed from the Holy into the Most Holy place once meticulous spoken prayers (prayers of the mind) become meaningless.

Suddenly our minds realise they are free and out of a job. The striving, the studied concentration, the mental effort ends suddenly—because we begin to pray with something other than our minds.

When our being, our spirit, begins to pray it is prayer of the heart, not of the mind. It is prayer that comes into us from God, a heavenly gift and flows naturally and easily, no effort of ours involved, no attempt at "concentration" or "meditation" needed. It just flows and flows and knowing how to "stop" (in order to come down to the level of ordinary work and life) becomes the issue.

* * * * *

There are things we must understand about our eyes. To “fix our eyes on the unseen” has nothing to do with “sight.” Everything we may see (even mental “visions” or “images” of Christ) is vain and never found in the Most Holy Place.

Christ himself is here. To gaze at visions or images (the product of our imagination) in his presence is the greatest abomination, the greatest idolatry thinkable.

* * * * *

God—even though he walked among us as Yahshua, a young Jewish man with a beard—does not come to us like we expect. Moses went up on the mountain where a cloud and thick darkness enveloped him. In this cloud and darkness (not physical darkness but a place where sight is impossible) we still meet him—and when all else grows dark around us, the cloud of his presence becomes for us a fire to light the way.

* * * * *

We will never “see God” like we inquisitive humans like to see. But we will know when we enter the cloud of his presence. He is not far from any one of us.

* * * * *

There are things we must understand about our hearts. Our hearts are not our minds. As long as we pray, study, concentrate, with our minds we by no means stand in the Most Holy Place. Neither are our “hearts” our actual organs that pump blood. We have no particular feeling or sense in that organ and to concentrate on it (as some suggest) may mislead us.

Our “heart” is the centre of our being—perhaps we can feel it in the centre of our bodies also, where nourishment from outside first flowed into us. It is in this “spiritual centre” of our bodies and beings that we are spiritually receptive and where the Spirit of Christ

finally “breaks in,” if we allow it, opening within us a fountain of living water (a torrent of non-mental prayer) that flows on its own. This is “prayer of the heart.”

* * * * *

In Germany they used to speak of hearts turning warm. Spanish believers speak of *entrañable amor*, *afecto entrañable*, and *entrañable misericordia* (Philippians 1:8, 2:1, and Colossians 3:12, etc.) *Amor* means love. *Afecto* means affection. *Misericordia* means mercy, and *entrañable* . . . well, what shall I say? The Spanish Bible accurately uses the Latin root from which we get in English, “entrails.”

Love, affection, and mercy—nothing we give or get from God is real until it becomes *entrañable*, of the heart, like the affection of the poor. Yahshua said of a poor and wicked woman: “Her many sins have been forgiven for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47)

* * * * *

Love and prayer of the heart stand in sharpest contrast to whatever mental recognition we may have given Christ before. In totally new and startling *Gemeinschaft* with him—after slipping through the veil—our bodies, souls, and spirits respond in delight that does away with any doubt we could possibly have entertained.

Suddenly, powerfully, it no longer matters what we do not know or cannot see, because we can feel. We do not know from where the wind comes or where it goes, but we know we are in it! And from the spiritual centre of our beings we begin to see what Christ moves in all men and created things.

* * * * *

It is strange, once within the Most Holy Place it is easy to think normally. All struggle to “keep our minds from wandering during prayer” ends, because we no longer pray just with our minds.

At the same time, what but Christ could we think about, in the cloud of his holy presence?

How could we, in Gemeinschaft with him, remember anyone else?

But once the moment of spiritual meeting is over, we do wrong to imagine it still with us. Only if we let it go when it goes, may it come back to us again.

All imagination, “spiritual fantasising,” is harmful and leads quickly to spiritual death.

* * * * *

Gemeinschaft with Christ, if we discover it, is a great secret we must carry with us. At first we would like to shout it out loud to everyone, but we soon discover we cannot because most do not understand. Most others—even most other Christians—think we are “off track,” crazy, or perhaps dangerous. Instead of listening to what we say they “turn again to rend us” (Matthew 7:6).

The more we discover in Gemeinschaft with Christ the less inclined we become to speak about it. But his love may constrain us (2 Corinthians 5:14).

* * * * *

A little flat area between gnarled higuieron trees, the garden, and our house in western Costa Rica I called the Pausramerhof, after an Anabaptist community in Moravia. At night, when the moon bathed the lowlands and the sea in gentle light, I would stand there. Moonlight reflected on the low tin roof of our house, and on banana leaves around the chicken house.

From the Pausramerhof I watched great thunderstorms at night, over the sea.

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At a small place beside the bay, at Caldera, we stopped with my parents to eat. The sun had just gone down. A cruise ship, a city afloat with a thousand lights, stood along the dock. Another one turned in the harbour and headed for the open sea.

They made a fire of coconut husks to keep the mosquitos from biting us. We sat at rickety tables under a caña brava roof and listened to the surf on the other side of the highway. Children and dogs played under streetlights on the sand.

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A boy—Libardo Mendivil, he said almost apologetically when I asked his name—led us from the great dark church through a doorway into a hall of an adjoining cloister. A priest who had seen us on the plaza just before time to lock up had insisted we follow him to where we would stay. “People with faces like you [gringo faces], dare not be out in Barranquilla after dark,” he said. *“Esto es Colombia.”*

Wild music, with shouting and laughter, rose to our second storey window. Loaded trucks roared slowly through the dust under trees in the plaza’s golden light. We slept in the scent of woodsmoke and rotting fruit in Barranquilla’s market area.

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To speak to Christ is easy. Early Christians prayed, “Kyrie eleison! (Lord, have mercy)!” Greek and Latin Christians after them prayed, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us sinners!”

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Up from Bailadores in the Venezuelan state of Mérida we climbed the Andes. Switch-back after switch-back, up through the clouds, leaving green valleys thousands of feet below us and still climbing, our little bus finally stopped in the rain-soaked frigid páramo to let a woman off. Smoke curled from the roof of her low house with thick walls in the fog. Several young women, one with a baby, and a boy, perhaps sixteen, came out to take her bags. He wore a felt hat and a drab *ruana* (poncho) over his shoulders. In the cold drizzle he stood to watch until we disappeared.

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The evening before nochebuena our neighbour and I cut plantain leaves for the women to wrap tamales. Early the next morning Doña Sofía and I ground the corn. Her white hair in a bun on the back of her head, she told me of her husband who died young. Of her son that also died and left her his orphaned children to raise. Of her many years doing laundry.

The aroma of cooking vegetables came to us through the open door. The sun grew hot on the back yard with flowers, and guinea hens pecked at stray kernels around our feet.

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¡Señor Jesucristo, ten piedad de nosotros, pecadores! (Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us, sinners!) That is also a good Sprüchli—one my mother would have liked.

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Joel said, “Everyone who calls (keeps calling) on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Joel 2:32). Peter, at Pentecost, said the same (Acts 2:21). So did Paul (Romans 10:13).

The poor, and the illiterate like Doña Sofía, have always known there is more to this instruction than great Bible scholars could imagine.

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When I discovered the “Jesus Prayer” it became my new Sprüchli and my way into that beyond the veil.

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Rolling out of the fog, on a paved street between coffee patches and new row houses, boys on bicycles met me on my way to the bus stop at San Nicolás de Taras. The same boys met me every morning. I began to know them by their sweaters and jeans. They carried lunch bags on their backs. I carried books to my job at a Catholic school.

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Practical. Precise. The early Christians already knew the Jesus Prayer says everything we need to say. *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!*

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“A little ladder” they called it in Russia. We may begin with the complete prayer of Jesus on every rung, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!* But as the world withdraws in a “cloud of forgetting” and we enter his holy presence we may reduce it to a word or two, “Lord Jesus,” or “Mercy,” or whatever seems right. Then we may find ourselves moving from rung to rung without words.

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The “ladder” (if we do not fall from it by thinking other thoughts) takes us into the cloud of his presence. But to climb it, step by step to Christ, takes daring and strength, like

climbing the rigging at sea. Only the violent make it into the Most Holy Place, the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 11:12).

We may lose our footing here or there. We may grab for the next rung and not find it. But whenever we slip and the wind flings us this way or that we may cry out, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!*

* * * * *

The Jesus Prayer, I discovered, naturally fuses with prayer of the heart. It takes no vast store of knowledge. The less we “know” while using it, the less we intellectually define it, the better.

Blind men on the road from Jericho used the Jesus Prayer. So did the tax collector in the temple—and beggars and illiterate women ever since.

* * * * *

We may climb the ladder, or fall from it. It is all the same. If the rigging escapes us and we hurtle downward into the ocean of the unknown, we may simply cry out, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!*

* * * * *

All prayer comes together in one: “Lord Jesus Christ,” our focus. “Have mercy,” our recognition of his infinite love. “On me a sinner,” the acknowledgement of our wretchedness before him. Free of the need for more words our “pagan babbling” may cease (Matthew 6:7), and we may pray with nothing more than the voice of “the person inside” (Ephesians 3:16).

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Silence comes to us in Gemeinschaft with Christ. The oftener we sit in heavenly places with him, the less we need to say.

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Purity comes to us in Gemeinschaft with Christ. With undivided attention on him, desires for worldly things find no more room.

We let the world concern itself about the world. We only work with our hands, doing as we are told for the time being to provide for our bare necessities. All desires beyond that—desires for beauty, comfort, or companionship—become meaningless distraction alongside Christ.

“The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17).

* * * * *

Peace comes to us in Gemeinschaft with Christ. In harmony with the cosmos, its Creator, and all that inhabit it, whatever conflict we might encounter in the world becomes a matter of little consequence—something to be forgiven and forgotten so we may keep on praying, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on us sinners!*

* * * * *

Love comes to us in Gemeinschaft with Christ. The oftener we receive of his mercy, in the depths of our wretchedness and inner need, the more we love him—and others.

* * * * *

Only a few bits of paper and a drink can stayed behind on the polished floor after my junior high students left on the last afternoon before Holy Week. I stayed at my desk, grading tests. A concierge emptied the waste can. The black boards were clean.

Two priests had come in the afternoon and my students had gone out—eagerly—in groups of four to confess. Laura, Alexa, Jorge, Marco, Alessandro. . . . Already old enough to know wickedness and inner need.

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us sinners!

* * * * *

I did not know how Harold Ramírez would do on his oral English exam. For several weeks I had taught the class of which he was part, in an upstairs room over a clothing store in Cartago, Costa Rica. He was a quiet student, not yet out of high school, and usually sat in the back. He wore his hair in a ponytail and a gold cross dangled from his ear.

Now, in a black and red *Nike* shirt, low jeans twice his size, and his *Edwin* cap on backwards, he sat in front of me. His sideburns were just starting to grow. For the first time I noticed the frightened look in his eyes, and that his hands were trembling.

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Disappointment, frustration, even the pain that comes from friends turning against us, treatment that seems unfair, or adversity in our earthly affairs—serves to our advantage. The more pressing and constant the pain we feel, the shorter the way to Christ.

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Going anywhere else but to Christ with our pain makes it get worse. Others should only learn of our pain by the advantage we derive, in Gemeinschaft with Christ, as a result of it.

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With the pain of *Gelassenheit* (detachment, surrender) comes *Demuth* (smallness, sense of insignificance, humility) and *Einfalt* (singleness of heart, simplicity). Only through the small door left in the centre of these three do we find our way into life (Matthew 7:13-14). Real life.

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Demuth. Feeling about two inches high and aware that we deserve nothing, the windows of heaven may open and all its pleasures break upon us. If they do, we are delighted. If not, we suffer no unpleasant surprise.

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Equality. For all said about it, only the poor may discover it. Together.

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On a trail, deep and soft through the underbrush behind the customs building at Ciudad del Carmen, Guatemala, we found our way to the river. The Suchiate. Down from a perfectly cone-shaped volcano, Tacaná, visible through tropical growth on either side, it widened into a stretch of calm where the *contrabandistas* crossed.

We met the Guatemalan guard (an off-duty border official) under a bank beside the trail. He startled us, two Costa Rican boys, my Mexican son, and I. But we soon learned his business and when he “knew that we knew” we were friends.

On another trail they appeared suddenly from the underbrush, groups of ten to fifteen porters, each carrying a 50 kg feed sack on his back with a mecapal. Each one, in passing, slipped a quetzal note to the guard. At the water's edge, hidden by a large rock, they set their bags down, took off their shoes, and in a few quick movements, their pants, tee shirts, and the rest. With their clothes held high in one hand, and their bags balanced on their shoulders with the other, they waded into the stream barely keeping their goods dry at the deepest place, struggling against the deep current, until they emerged on the Chiapas side.

Silently, swiftly, they came. Most of them still in their teens. They answered our questions briefly and hurried on. Work to do.

After dark, when we could finally leave immigration and customs, the guard with whom we had chatted was back on duty, automatic rifle slung from his shoulder. He met us under the lights at the last checkpoint, grinned widely and waved us through: *¡Qué les vaya bien, muchachos!*

* * * * *

Haughtiness, self-centredness, pride—everything we called *Stoltz* among the Team People—makes us analyse continually how well we perform. It keeps pushing us on to tell others what we have found and pulls us deep into religious controversy. Demuth, on the other hand, leads to *Einfalt* (simplicity) and peace. We no longer worry how to do what. We just come before Christ *ganz klein und inwendig gebeugt* (altogether little and stooped over inside) and he has mercy on us.

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We make no mistake for choosing the way down. It leads from the imaginary into the real.

We lose nothing in *wahre Gelassenheit* (letting go of everything). It is where Christ comes to us.

We deny ourselves nothing through “self denial.” It is the key to heaven.

* * * * *

Down. The bad word.

But the way down, in fact, is the way “up.” We have just been looking at it wrong—like children peering at an unreal world from between their legs.

The needle’s eye into the Kingdom of Heaven is not at the top toward which everyone is struggling. It is at the bottom, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* where hardly anyone wants to go.

But someone did. And in the “fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, we may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11).

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Down. Down beneath the surface. Not as bad as we thought it would be. In fact, once we know how to dive and swim under water, it is an unlikely paradise.

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Just before nightfall, later than my friend Gordon would have liked, we left the city centre of San Cristóbal del Táchira to visit its *favela* (slum) along the Río Torbes. The change, from drowsy streets under mimosa trees, to incredibly crowded and cluttered houses built half on top of each other, helter-skelter down to the river invisible far below, was total and abrupt.

Suddenly we found ourselves among people everywhere. Descending steep winding stairs we picked our way between open doorways and coffee cans with flowers in little open windows. Corrugated metal on stepped roofs, every so often level with the walkway, sagged from children having played on them, among bricks and garbage. Down, steeply downward, we descended into the Venezuelan night.

On the first landing we stopped to talk with a man (delighted when he found my name was Pedro, like his) sitting in the door of a tiny room. He said he was ninety years old, but rose unsteadily to take my hand with two of his when he saw we would leave. "*Que Dios les acompañe,*" (may God go with you) he hesitated to release me, "and do, please do, come back!"

To this Pedro added in a hoarse whisper, "And don't go further down. It is not safe!" Gordon looked worriedly at me. But we waved to him and kept on.

Down and around the twisting stairway, sometimes looking into little open porches where gas tanks and plastic wash buckets stood beneath us. Down past little boys playing on the stairs with a toy truck, its rear wheels missing. Two women talked to us. One of them, older, said she was a *creyente* and we spoke of the Way. We shared the good news of the Kingdom, of peace, and she was happy. "But don't go further down," she begged us. "It is not safe. Your lives could be in danger."

Gordon, my friend from the United States, did not know Spanish. But he caught the gestures of the woman speaking and looked more worried.

We kept on descending.

Down past a young man squatting at the hinges he was screwing into a new doorway, the light from a bare bulb revealing many people in the partly constructed house behind him. We talked about his building and he looked pleased. Very pleased. Even his dog looked friendly. "But don't go further down," the young man said. "There are *maleantes* (gangsters) down there. *No vayan por su propio bien* (don't go for your own good)."

We continued downward.

After we passed a little shop, where we chatted with the owner sitting on a crate amid radio music on a garbage-strewn walkway outside, we got into a more poorly lit stretch. Suddenly I saw them come, and my heart leaped into my throat. A group of boys, some without shirts, one with a band around his head, descending swiftly toward us in long strides and leaps, not a sound but that of their tennis shoes braking.

Was this it?

“¡Hola!” I managed to squeak with them almost upon us.

The second one glanced at me, no malice on his youthful face, although tattooed, and with coloured strings around his wrist. “¡Dios!” he returned my greeting and in a moment all had disappeared.

A Dios, not hit or strangled but commended to God, this far down the stairs.

Cut deeply with the pain of brothers and sisters in need, but infinitely grateful to Christ for having let me come to where mercy is born, I noticed that lights had begun to twinkle throughout the favela. Innumerable points of light accenting the great darkness above the Río Torbes. Then we came to another corner and saw long flights of stairs continuing downward.

We had not nearly come to the bottom yet.

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Only in the deep places among sinfulness and need do we find our way into *Gemeinschaft* with Christ—and others.

Poverty is the birthplace of community.

7

Empty

During the 1990s we became part of an unaffiliated “plain” congregation in Pennsylvania. That, and a friendly relationship with the Moravian Church, led us to temporary involvement with mission colonisation in northern South America (Venezuela, Guyana, and Suriname). Since 1999 we have lived in a small co-operative community in Chile.

During the forenoon I flew in light through clouds between San José and Bogotá. Great white billows let me see nothing below. Streaks of water ran across the little window where I sat holding Pascal’s *Pensées* in my hands.

The blue interior of the plane was clean, and nearly empty.

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Leaving Coatzacoalcos we crossed the new Usumacinta bridge, suspended from one silver tower, gleaming at sunrise. Hundreds of feet above the water we looked out over white birds winging their way across wet green plains. Pillars of flame rose from an oil refinery at Minatitlán, upstream. Among clumps of banana plants, far beneath us, Brahmin cattle grazed.

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Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on us sinners! Again and again the Jesus Prayer tears us loose from the shifting sights and sounds of the world (the world, not the earth) that threaten to braid us in.

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Shan Mohammed Abdul Razack parked his bike behind the green and white mosque at New Amsterdam and looked up, puzzled, at me. (I had found a place in an open doorway part ways up a minaret for morning prayers.) When I spoke to him he slowly, cautiously, became convinced of my good intentions. Just returned to Guyana from Saudi Arabia he was assistant Imam but still studying. He opened his books and we did a Spanish lesson together. Then he unlocked the mosque and we walked around the balcony of the tallest minaret. He showed me their assembly room on the second floor, clean and bare, where all prostrate themselves to pray, “the rich at the feet of the poor, all on the same level,” on a green carpet.

I liked the mosque, wide open to air and light on every side, and found I could pray in its emptiness too: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on us sinners!*

Shan Mohammed Abdul Razack’s father, he told me, was a Hindu. And his mother a member of the Church of Christ. We exchanged addresses.

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Climbing across the mountain on the Pan-American Highway, with our windows open, our bus is like a church.

Every morning I get on at San Nicolás de Taras. We sit in rows, five across and sixteen long, from Cartago to San José. We struggle our way in and out (people stand tightly crowded in the aisle) steadying ourselves by clinging to handrails overhead. We come, fresh from our showers in clean clothes, with our briefcases and bags. We are silent and polite.

A woman beside me fingers her rosary. I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. Her lips are moving. We are anonymous, and the mouths we closed when we said good-bye at home will not open again until we say, “*¡Buenos Dias! ¿Qué tal amaneció?*” at work.

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The Jesus Prayer calls us out of the 21st century, back past the Modern Ages (when almost everyone threw everything away), back past superstition and vain dead ritual to Christianity at its source—to Christ.

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The Jesus Prayer, if prayed from the heart, knocks our imaginations cold. It is the “Whoa” or “Halt” to the intellect that frees us to discover Yahshua, the Christ, for real.

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From several countries we came to Ciudad Bolívar on the Orinoco River in May. Pedro (a Colombian) took Andrés (a Venezuelan), Paul of the Moravian church in Suriname, and me, downtown. The main street—river on one side and colonial buildings along the other—was still busy under street lamps in the warm night. Amerindians holding children without clothes sat among mosquitos under a balcony. While the men looked for a telephone I walked to a stone balustrade above the river. The kiosks were empty. A couple sat on the base of a monument. Up the river a string of golden lights marked the towers of the Angostura bridge, and the Orinoco, deep and black, wider than I could see in the night, glided past my feet.

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We do not need to pray the Jesus Prayer by rite or force. Neither do we need to pray in rapid continuity. That could become “vain repetition.” Rather we may leave spaces

between our prayers, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!* as long as they remain uncluttered, and open to him.

We should never be ashamed, however, to call on the name of the Lord to be saved. The Jesus prayer, once it becomes part of us, bridges the gap between us and the Infinite.

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Mosquito nets hanging over our beds would keep us safe from insects, upstairs in the Moravian manse at Georgetown, Guyana. Cheerful lights lit the high wooden room. Peering out from one of its Demerara windows (wooden louvers designed to let in air but keep water out) I listened to rain in surrounding palm trees.

On one side stood the John Amos Comenius school, on the other the Moravians' wooden church, and in front of us—invisible now in the dark—the Victorian buildings of Georgetown among squatters' houses vegetable plots along the Lamaha canal. Waves of rain came in with the wind from the sea.

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Andacht (a time to remember, to reflect on) we called our Lord's Day meetings in Mexico. In special times of *Andacht* we find our way into Eden again.

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At least once, but preferably twice or more times a day, we do well to hold times of *Andacht*—mental and physical silence, not necessarily free of ritual, like Bible reading or formal prayer—in which to meet Christ. The more faithfully we hold to it the more likely we keep meeting Christ throughout the day.

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To keep Andacht takes effort and organisation. But what happens in it depends on no effort of our own. In a flash, in an instant, if we come in poverty, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us, sinners!* a flood of glory may break on us and keep running off, all day long.

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Not wicked, but good and religious thoughts most easily distract us. Suddenly, in Andacht before the Infinite, uninterrupted inspiration may come. More and more insight and blessing, so fast we cannot contain it all. But we have no reason to worry. If what comes to us is from Christ, it will come again at another time. If it does not, it was mere distraction.

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The best way to hold Andacht is to purpose beforehand not to keep anything in mind or write down what comes to us during that time. Then more and more may come.

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“Sitzet mal ruhig,” (sit quietly, restfully) they would whisper to us little ones in meeting, and when our bodies became perfectly still, we discovered our spirits may dwell lightly within them. After ten minutes or more of absolute stillness, conscious only of the breath of life within us, we could even feel shocked to rediscover the ability of moving our extremities and rising to our feet again.

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We should not think we can get into the Most Holy Place any other way than through choice, obedience, and effort on our part. Gemeinschaft with Christ does not “just come

to us.” We need to be where it can and will come—at the veil. But from that point onward our choices, obedience, and effort, become superfluous.

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The Way (some call it the “way of contemplation”) must be pointed out to us and learned, like anything else. Some have a gift for painting, but no one paints like Rembrandt or Manet without much trial and error.

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“Learning Christ” is to learn another language (Ephesians 4:20). We may have a linguistic gift, but no one learns a language without much study. That is why so many students drop out of class and forget what they have learned. It takes perseverance. It takes a willingness to try and fail many times. Only the most persistent learn the language of heaven.

* * * * *

No special technique or “wonder method” takes us quickly and easily into Gemeinschaft with Christ. Nothing happens quickly or easily until we learn what to avoid, what to choose, and how to identify what comes to us. The oftener we choose the right way, the easier we can find it.

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Fasting is of great value—like Andacht around bread and wine, or in “unprogrammed meetings.”² Along with these we may try many rites or “methods” and like them. But no sooner do we focus on a method instead of Christ and the veil stands between us again.

² Name given by Friends (Quakers) to the meeting where no-one speaks unless personally moved by the Holy Ghost.

We may outgrow method after method. That is no problem. They may stop working for us every time we take another step from imagination toward reality.

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We need not waste our time seeking a better, or the “right” method. (Exactly how to sit, when to do what, etc.) All we need to seek is Christ, and when he opens The Way before us, we find great freedom in it.

But The Way is straight and narrow, and we may stray from it if we become careless or haughty.

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Even though we study, we fast, we deny ourselves, and dare to climb upward rung by rung, we cannot in the end force our way into the Most Holy Place. All we can do is keep struggling on to where we stand at the veil and wait. Sometimes, when we come totally empty and poor, we do not have to wait long. Not even a minute. Then he comes and we sit to eat with one another.

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“Saviour at the cross I’m waiting,” we used to sing among the young people. “All to leave and follow thee. Wretched, poor, despised, forsaken, waiting Lord thy sympathy.

I am waiting at the cross, I am waiting at the cross,
I am waiting at the cross to be saved!

All my earthly fame and treasure I surrender now to Thee.
Let thy mercy, let thy pleasure speak the word and I am free!

Precious Saviour smile upon me, God of wisdom, love, and might.
Take my heart, in pity own me. Show thy face and all is bright.

I am waiting at the cross, I am waiting at the cross,
I am waiting at the cross to be saved!

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To wait is to stop reaching out, struggling, or groping after elusive “experience.” It is to leave off from frenzied exercising of our minds. We may feel nothing while we wait and we do not need to. All we need is to pray: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!*

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On a stone breakwater, out from the dike at Georgetown, I walked in morning wind from the sea. The sun rose. An Indo-Guyanese family, standing in the water before clumps of mangrove and little flags fluttering from bamboo canes, lifted leaves and flowers in their hands.

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Two little girls and a boy, the Moravian pastor’s tow-headed children, played between flowering shrubs on the sandy yard. In through a gate from the street, members of the congregation at Combé, founded just past Fort Zeelandia on the Suriname River in 17 , arrived in small groups. They greeted one another in Dutch, and we sat on bare wooden benches to sing with them in the Saal.

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Coming into Gemeinschaft with Christ does not make us perfect at once. But it is The Way there. The more time we spend with him, the more impurities come to our

attention. Then, if we repent and forsake them, he washes them away. Our Gemeinschaft is in his blood and wounds (1 John 1:7).

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The deeper we feel our sinfulness and need for the blood of the Lamb, the greater our potential Gemeinschaft with Christ. Only if our sense of indebtedness to him becomes total, may our Gemeinschaft become total—without bottom, or limits in any other direction. *Der Abgrund der Liebe* (the abyss of love) Moravian believers called it.

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When we enter Gemeinschaft with Christ our lives change. Problems may not all disappear at once. But they stop being problems. Nothing of what goes on in the world needs to get fixed for us to come in poverty and true surrender to him.

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Instead of worldly thoughts and concerns hiding us from Christ, the opposite, in Gemeinschaft with him, may take place. His merciful presence may overtake us at any time, suddenly, causing us to forget what we were thinking about to just spend time with him.

Our hands can be busy while in Gemeinschaft with Christ, but not our heads. Therefore it is good to work with our hands.

* * * * *

People used to think the “spiritual life” belonged to special people in special places—perhaps only to the celibate.

It does.

It belongs only to the especially poor.

The poor and detached may enter the Most Holy Place, right here, right now. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

* * * * *

Restraint and seriousness, not eating or talking too much, not complaining or getting involved in what does not concern us, nonconformity to the world, prepares us for Gemeinschaft with Christ. In simple living we may discover that special times and special groups are not always the best, and certainly not the only places to meet him.

To look for insignificant manual chores, washing dishes, sweeping, cleaning, working in a shop or factory, riding buses to and from work, gets us much further on The Way. They provide us with excellent times and places for Gemeinschaft.

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To build community around the ideal of Gemeinschaft with Christ is only possible within the wider circle of believers—a circle that includes men, women, and children in all stages of spiritual progress.

Gemeinschaft, as even celibate communities dedicated to “contemplation” have discovered, cannot be regulated, taught, or reproduced at will. It is a gift that comes to us from Christ. It comes in varying degrees and forms to his believing community.

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In which church may we most likely find others in Gemeinschaft with Christ and companions to walk with us on The Way?

At best, earthly congregations only reflect the *vollendete Gemeinde* (those already gathered around Christ in the heavens) like the moon reflects the sun. At worst, earthly congregations stand between us and the upper church, like the moon during a total eclipse.

The smaller, plainer, simpler, emptier the earthly congregation, the more likely it gives a good reflection of Christ and the upper church. A true reflection is one of peace and loving community. Loud “active” churches struggling to be the biggest or the best, and where men grapple for power, might sooner be reflections of hell.

* * * * *

No error, no misguided belief, no shameless religious bigotry in the world need trouble us in the “little church.” Christ does not call us to correct evil. He calls us to overcome evil with good—that is, to live in *Gemeinschaft* with him.

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From our upstairs window we looked down into the inner Hof of the Starlite Hutterian community southwest of Winnipeg. A circle of residences, just like the one we stayed in, surrounded it. Young trees stood along concrete walkways where adults and children in dark overclothes hurried from every direction toward the dining hall.

Amber lights still shone among the trees that already stood almost bare. A cold fall sky moved rapidly overhead. Breakfast time.

* * * * *

To escape from the great rain I hurried up steps, through open doors into the soaring wooden interior, charcoal black on white, of St. George’s Anglican cathedral. Side doors stood open too, and rain blew in the windows. Groups of adolescents in school uniform—both Afro and Indo-Guyanese—had also come in. They talked in low voices

one to another and doubled up laughing. A janitor working with a push broom watched them out of the corner of his eye.

The rushing noise of cars came in from the street. I watched a man standing with his hands taught on the reins, passing clop, clop, clop, on a loaded dray cart. The evening before, with my friend David, we had sat in the cathedral for high mass.

* * * * *

What do we like? Christ himself, or the excitement of “finding” him? Some new “technique,” the words of another “guru,” or a fascinating group we have not known about before? As long as it is not Yahshua, the Christ, that we love, we must go from one to another. Affection for everything else wears off and experiences wear out.

After we come to Yahshua, the Christ, we turn always and only to him. He is not an idea or a technique. He is a friend.

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Yahshua comes as a young man looking for the one he loves, “leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice. . . . ‘Arise and come with me,’ he says. ‘See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth and the cooing of doves is heard in our land’” (Song of Songs 2:8-12).

He is the initiator. We need not worry how to find him. He finds us. All it takes is our availability and response.

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“He who loves me will be loved of my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. . . . If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14: 21-23).

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Deleep Singh runs a store, mainly for his workers on Grant Enterprise, half an hour in from the Essequibo Coast. Alongside his dock it sits on stilts, a good place to tie dugout canoes. Inside the store, painted white and with a large window facing the river and the morning sun, a young man sold us a jar of Marmite. Kitchen utensils and canned goods stood neatly on shelves behind him.

Alongside Deleep’s house behind the store, we watched his workers, bare-backed, in procession, loading sacks of rice onto a boat. One of them whistled a cheerful tune.

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Anything short of Christ, leaves us hungering, thirsting, searching for the real. Lev Tolstoy died saying, “To seek. Always to seek. . . .”

But when our hungering, thirsting, and searching take us to desperation and beyond—to where we sit with nothing but an uplifted hand—strange things begin to happen. Christ fills the hungry and thirsty, and finds those that seek.

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“I am the bread of life,” Yahshua said. “He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). This is the beggars’ strange world.

Only after everything has failed and we are truly poor do we come to Christ and believe in him. Otherwise we do not need to.

The King, making his rounds, picks up all beggars and brings them to his palace. There is music under the palm trees. There is dancing and a great feast. But those who are respectable and with means get left to eat their own food at home.

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Christ, when he comes to us, may startle us with his easy and natural ways. We were made for Gemeinschaft with him, after all. The only thing we have to do is wait where he arranged to meet us—in poverty.

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On a Tuesday evening, after teacher's meeting, I left school later than usual. The bus was full. I stood in its crowded aisle until they let me off at San Nicolás in the rain.

Walking home, clutching my books and umbrella, I jumped puddles and rivers on the street. Painted chalices, doves and crosses still decorated the pavement from Corpus Christi.

I arrived at home wet. But the kitchen was brightly lit and warm and dry clothes lay on shelves in our bedroom. I heard rain on the patio and our children playing.

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Filled with the Spirit of Christ, from head to foot, we are healed. We come to wholeness and well-being in ourselves. That brings us to the same with God and others. But when "fullness of joy" ends, we do wrong to imagine it still with us.

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On the flat Suriname shore, barely visible along the southern horizon, tin roofs glistened here and there among palm trees in the sun. Our rusty boat bucked the brown waves. A woman with a baby, East Indian, stood by the engine room. Others sat among boxes and bags on plank benches beneath the roof of the boat on which a Muslim crew member in a ragged tee shirt prostrated himself in *Salatul-Asr* (afternoon prayers).

Bismillahir-Rahmanir-Rahim (in the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful), his Arabic sounded as fluent to me as his Guyanese English. From a bucket he dipped water to wash his hands, his mouth and his nose. Then he washed his face, his head and his feet. He lifted his hands to his ears. Then, placing them over each other, he began to pray: *Subhanak-Alla-humma wa bihamdika wa tabarakasmuka wa ta'ala jadduka wa la ilaha ghairuka* (All glory and praise be to you, Lord! Blessed is your name and your majesty exalted! There is none worthy of praise but you!). *A'oozu billahi minash-shaitanir-rajeem. Bismillah-i-Rah-man-ir-Raheem. Alhamdu lillahi Rabbil-'aalameen ar-Rahman-ir-Rahim. . . .* (In you Lord I find refuge from the accursed Satan. In your name, Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. All praise to you, Lord of the worlds, the Beneficent, the Merciful, owner of the Day of Judgement. You alone we worship and ask for help. Show us the straight path, the path of those you have favoured, not the path of those that earn your anger or go astray)."

Even though I did not understand the man in a torn shirt I knew a little about Muslim prayers, and in the bouncing prow, roaring and lurching slowly toward Nieuwe Nickerie in tropical heat and light, I prayed too: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on us sinners!*

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The Word. It came to us in Bethlehem. It has always come, and keeps coming. Infinite in revelation, in scope, in ability. The Word that speaks in Tananarive as well as in Jerusalem. The Word that spoke to Dostoyevsky and Chief Joseph as well as to Herakleitos and Job. The Word that came in all languages at Pentecost and that comes to me from the starlit heavens above the Valle del Guarco at night, through Herrnhut's

beautiful songs, and on the beach at Balboa park, across the bay from Panama City's skyline on a rainy day.

Whatever wants to come between us and the Word—Christ within us the Hope of Glory—is a devil. There is the devil of worldly distraction. The devil of the intellect. The devil of religion, and the devil of “God-ordained authority” stepped out of its place.

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We may be geography conscious, orienting ourselves with the directions on the continent, in the hemisphere, or in the solar system when we start to pray. That is fine. We must pray in reality. But when the Word comes to us, time and place lose their relevance. We do not have to go up (nor down, if we are in the southern hemisphere), nor east, or anywhere else to find him. He is here.

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The Kingdom of God, Yahshua said, is within us.

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We cannot help but view the cosmos around us from the vantage point of ourselves. Contemplation must begin at a precise point. That is precisely at the centre of our spirits, souls, and bodies.

Strictly mental contemplation becomes too lofty for us and wafts into thin air. Strictly corporal contemplation is that of animals. But when we come with body, soul, and spirit, before the Lord Christ in his majesty he may welcome us into Gemeinschaft with him.

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Our minds quickly and easily spin out of control with worthless thoughts. We think about people and situations as if by doing so we could set them in order. For this reason our minds must be subject to our hearts in which pure Gemeinschaft is born.

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We think with our heads. We move about and do things with our bodies. But between the two lies the inactive, protected, “middle region”—the region of the soul. In the region of our bodies’ last connection, severed at birth, we now connect to spiritual worlds.

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Once we know where and what the heart is, we may tell at any time, at any place, whether we are “full” or “empty.” With the heart we love, we suffer pain, or feel joy. God “sheds his love abroad” in our hearts. With the heart we beg, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!*

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Gemeinschaft involves us completely. Therefore the intellect, the mind plays only a minor role, and is only an observer of what is happening between us and Christ. The mind must learn to stay as quiet as possible and in the background to let our souls, our “inner man” behold the face of Christ. 2 Cor. 2

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Waiting we stand ready receive him when he comes. But we must stand ready with far more than just our minds. We must stand ready to receive him with our bodies, our souls, and our spirits at the same time. Our bodies have an amazing capacity of spiritual reception. They were created to be the “temple of the Holy Ghost.”

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Christ's presence in our hearts brings us into an awareness of ourselves and our surroundings. Every part of ourselves—our spirits, souls, and bodies, even every part of our bodies—becomes aware of him, washed clean in his blood, and totally surrendered. This is to die, be buried, and rise to new life in Christ. It is *Bekehrung* (turning around, conversion).

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Mist rose from the pond below the old Amos Reesor farmhouse, north of Toronto. Waking up before the rest I stood among lilac bushes and listened to meadowlarks in the scent of newly mown hay. Across the road stood the modest barn of what had been the Mennonite bishop Abram Smith's place. Not far to the south, across deacon Aaron Grove's farm, the first subdivisions of Markham and Richmond Hill sprawled across the land my ancestors carved from Upper Canada's wilderness less than two centuries before. Immigrants from Hong Kong and Kuwait. Parsees. Ever more Caribbean Islanders and refugees from Eastern Europe. Incredible numbers of new office buildings stood there, and the distant roar of traffic came to me from streets and a superhighway I had never seen before.

The ripples of a water spider grew in widening circles on the pond.

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Cutting a clean curve downstream, Roy Shivmangal brought our boat with grace to Manuel da Silva's *stelling* (riverside dock) at La Gran Malgratout and our wake died down. Sunlight lay hot and white on the plantation, accessible only from the lower Pomeroon River. Down from its great ramshackle house, set in a riot of flowers and tropical growth, lay twenty-foot pans of cacao to dry. With Dom Manuel the men walked through citrus groves (his family, Brazilian planters, came to British Guiana generations ago) and I sat on a plank that crossed a canal.

Low-crowned Malaysian palms, heavy with coconuts, shaded its water, black and ruler straight inland as far as I could see. Chickens murmured, walking about on bare earth beneath the trees. From behind a worker's house came thumping noises and the sound of clothes being lifted from water in a tub.

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Suddenly, in Gemeinschaft with Christ, we realise that anything we might tell him is disconnected and meaningless because our focus is elsewhere. It is on Christ himself—Christ in us and in the light and glory of the cosmos to which we have come in full harmony. It is beyond words.

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Gemeinschaft (fellowship, *koinonia*) is love in action.

Just like the body participates in happiness, excitement, or grief, it participates in love. Before we know it our faces crinkle when we are happy and we wear smiles. Our hearts beat fast when excited. We feel a cold weight in our centres when we are sad and pain in our knees when we think of others' wounds. Love comes to us in the centre of our beings—more and more of it, until we run over with *entrañable amor* so good we do not know what shall become of ourselves.

But it is a mistake to dwell on our love for Christ. By doing so we lose it.

Only by focusing on Christ does our love for him grow until it overwhelms and transforms us.

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Our hearts are deceitful. They quickly lead us from Christ into the imaginary and sensual. For that reason, even though we may pass beyond the need of words in the

Most Holy Place, we do well to keep praying in an ordinary straight-forward way from time to time: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on me a sinner!*"

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Seliger Trost (consolation, blessing, peace). Spiritual ecstasy hits us square in the spiritual centre—not in the head but in the heart. After it comes (the “warming of the heart,” the anointing of the Spirit, inner baptism, entrañable amor, whatever we may call it), we never need to doubt Christ again.

Seliger Trost is a great relief. It works! It happened to me! But if Trost, rather than Christ who gives it, becomes the object of our desire, he never gives it to us again.

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Seliger Trost—of course it comes to the body as well as to the spirit and soul.

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Contact between Christ and our physical beings? Why not? He is as much Creator and Lord of our bodies as he is of our spirits. A sublimation of human desire? Of course. What else should we feel but human desire for Christ? We are fully human after all—and he is too. But he no longer comes to us in the flesh. To seek a fleshly, sensual, relationship with him is a terrible mistake.

“I will arise and go to Jesus,” we used to sing. “He will embrace me with his arms. In the arms of my dear Saviour, Lo, there are ten thousand charms!” But what did we mean? Only through breaking out of the imaginary and sensual may we discover him for real.

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We cannot help but become aware of physical pleasures when they come to us in Gemeinschaft with Christ. But no sooner do we turn our attention to them than they (and he) vanish. We dare do nothing more than glance at them out of the corner of our spiritual eyes for our Andacht to continue in holiness and joy.

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It is useless to try and repeat experiences. Every time Christ comes to us in holy Gemeinschaft is a gift of its own—good for once and with others to follow.

We must accept the fact that we can do no initiating. All we can do is sit before him empty. Empty of thought and effort. Empty of our own righteousness, but open and uncovered in desire before him. Then it is up to Christ whether he will fill us or not. Sometimes he leaves us sit in empty longing. That is the trial of our faith. Sometimes he lets us have only a few drops of sweet wine. But then again he may pour us full of the mightiest and most beautiful wine of love, filling us to the brim and causing us to run over and over until we reel in uncontrollable joy.

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Unspeakable freedom (and very often the seliger Trost) comes to us when we give up and come before Christ with no demand for “experience.”

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Across from the Franciscan mission with its tile roofs and cloister—thick low walls to withstand earthquakes—we ate on the square in Orosi, Costa Rica’s oldest settlement. All we could see of the valley from under the roof of our café, open to flowers and eucalyptus trees around the square, was dark green coffee in the rain, growing up nearly vertical mountain slopes around us. Vehicles splashed through puddles on the street. Wet workmen shovelled gravel from a truck at a building site. Across the street two women with children, one of them holding a parasol, waited on a bus.

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Ordinary sights and sounds need not distract us from Gemeinschaft with Christ. Creation exists in him. We do not become aware of Christ until we move into awareness of ourselves and our surroundings as they are.

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Yahshua, the Christ, is part of the reality of Creation. All other gods were mythical characters of fearful proportions. Our God, beyond all his divine qualities, is also an ordinary man. As much a part of us as tile-roofed houses with wide verandas on coffee farms. If there were no creation we could not believe in Christ. But because creation is, we cannot deny him. The order and beauty of the Cosmos is Christ visible to human eyes

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We come to Andacht to wake up, to face reality, not to fall into fantasy or a swoon. Every time we feel ourselves slipping into the unreal, into make-believe or forced ecstasies, we must open our eyes to see the earth and ourselves as we are before Christ again. Then sweet Trost may come upon us.

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Nothing new or different, just what is—as it is. It may take us a long time to get there, or to find comfort in it. But when we do, we begin to awaken from the dream.

We begin as babies. All we do is eat and sleep. Only at times do we become vaguely conscious. But as we get used to opening our eyes, we explore what is real. One by one we catch sight of our misconceptions that promptly, like elves, as soon as we see them, cease to exist. One by one through childhood, adolescence, youth and beyond,

until the last one—the elf of conception itself—goes. Then we have nothing left. Our room stands empty, swept clean (Matthew 12:44), and Yahshua may come to us.

Or the elves, fully grown and multiplied, may return.

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We live (as long as we think we know how to live) in terrible bondage under imaginary powers. For so long we have languished under the elves, the trolls, and giants of our imagination that we hardly know reality anymore when we see it.

The Way? When we catch a glimpse of it, we know it has to be the wrong one for sure. To choose it looks like choosing the “crazy” above common sense. It looks like choosing the “wild” above a tame and ordinary career. But only if we choose The Way identified with “visionaries,” “communitarians,” and “fanatics” in every generation—all-out war between darkness and light may we burst into the real world.

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We may (and must) be ourselves before Christ. A great hindrance in Andacht is to assume a saintly or ethereal demeanour—as if we were something other than humans with ordinary human sight and senses. Christ only comes to us if we are straight-forward and down-to-earth with him. Reduced to begging, why tell lies?

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We make a great mistake by closing our eyes and trying to find Christ in an imaginary “heaven.” When I stand at the back of Aula 4-C watching my eighth grade students, every one in light blue and navy uniforms, every one bowed low (and silent for once) over a history test, I must find him in the classroom. When I squeeze my way through the Saturday morning Cartago market I must find him in Cartago market. “He is not far from any one of us. In him we live and move and have our being.” This does not mean I

disregard the Ancient of Days, pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise, whose chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form, who comes through the dark on the wings of the storm. It simply means that where I am, Christ is too.

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A sure way to get nowhere with Christ is to try, day after day, to conjure up what is not real. *The Cloud of Unknowing* (a book written in England during the 1300s) calls us to leave everything earthly behind in a “cloud of forgetting,” to simply love the One that hides himself in what we cannot see or know. That is the right way. But we cannot start there.

Andacht begins with us fully on earth and fully aware of it. We may pray with our eyes wide open, seeing and hearing distinctly everything around us. If our thoughts float off into the unreal or irrelevant, something that precludes us meeting Christ at all, we must bring them sharply back to reality. The reality of our emptiness before him. Then we may close our eyes and wait until he comes.

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Between prayers *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on us sinners!* we may listen. We do not need to strain our ears to hear celestial music. Even though we hear nothing but the refrigerator running, it is reality. It is where we and the Lord Christ are now.

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Down into thick darkness below the lights and shops around Guyana’s international airport I found my way, cautiously, into the Timehri squatting area. No buildings, or people that talked in muffled tones behind them, stood distinctly visible. Two bicycles rolled past. In a tiny spot of light behind a kerosene lamp on her counter I saw a woman in a fruit stand, still open. Large and cheerful, with a deep rich voice, she overcame whatever shock with which she greeted me, at once.

Within minutes I learned she was a baptised Christian—Michelle. I scanned her shop, little more than a metre wide and not that deep on my side of the counter, for what I might possibly buy. Plastic bags of green fruits, as large as cherries, stood beside her lamp. Several hands of stubby bananas hung on nails. Through an open doorway in the back, a man in a shirt with its sleeves ripped out appeared. Home from work. A cutlass hung from his belt and he looked hungry and tired.

“Your husband?”

“No Suh. He Ralston,” she answered quickly.

Ralston flashed me a gleaming smile in the dark when I shook his hand. It was a powerful hand. I bought a bag of green fruits and bananas.

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Gemeinschaft, by nature, is unpredictable. It involves more than just ourselves. But exactly that makes it real and good.

We never know when, where, or for how long we may meet Christ. Many times, even during Andacht, we can do nothing but wait on him. In poverty. Then when we least expect it, at work or during exchange with others, he comes to us with great vigour and joy.

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Our Gemeinschaft with Christ is sporadic and disappointing only if we want to have it our way, all the time—if we want to arrange our meetings and plan what should happen there. That leaves us frustrated. Yahshua, the Christ, is a person with a mind of his own. Besides that, he is the one in control. All we can do is co-operate.

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Every Andacht is an experience in its own right. Either the presence and grace of Christ overwhelm us—body, soul, and spirit—or we feel our emptiness intensely. The only feeling that can have no place in it is ongoing mediocrity or boredom. That is not Andacht, but spiritual death.

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Walking home with Justin, Felix, and Julitta we stopped on the high crown of our neighbour's cow pasture to watch the light, rose red and glowing, fade from snow-crowned volcanos across Lake Llanquihue. A nip of frost and the scent of dusty cow paths hung in the air. Armela Appel's house, her pheasant pen, plastic-covered greenhouse, and compost-pile sat huddled beneath eucalyptus trees. Very tall trees. From behind them the sound of Ignacio Kahler's milker pump came to us through the fall evening.

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To think that we get born again to enter a stable or constantly growing "salvation experience" is a great deception. It is the way of much disappointment and pain.

Our walk with Christ is a constant fluctuation between emptiness and fulness. (It must be that way. It is alive.) Sometimes, the Spirit of Christ may fill us for days on end. At other times we may enjoy his visits at intervals, several minutes or half hours throughout the day. Resting assured that he will come again, and that we shall stand in permanent Gemeinschaft with him forever is what pulls us through bittersweet emptiness and longing, no matter how often we are left in them, or for how long they last.

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Gemeinschaft with Christ involves the strange pleasure of emptiness. “Create in me a pure heart, O God,” David wrote. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” said Yahshua, “for they shall see God.”

Not until I saw the connection between purity and emptiness did I understand why we hung no curtains, or calendars with pictures, in our Orthodox Mennonite homes. Or why we held no “revival meetings” and operated no “missions.”

When we are rich, increased with goods, and have need of nothing, Christ withholds the Trost of heavenly Gemeinschaft from us. Or else he gives it by the drop, until we see that we are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked, and sit once more to beg: *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on us sinners!*

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The purer we stand before Christ, the less distracted by thoughts and feelings—feelings about our own work in particular—the sooner the veil may open before us.

The pure in heart see God.

We also discover that the purer our lives become in general, the easier it is to find our way through to the veil. The desire for Gemeinschaft becomes, for this reason, the greatest motivator to lead a pure life—to eat less, to want less, to be less involved in the world’s passing amusements.

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We do not separate ourselves from the world “because the Bible teaches it.” That is not enough. Neither do we separate ourselves to belong to Christian community. Separation is a matter of the heart. Its only cause is the overwhelming all-encompassing desire for what is real.

When we desire Christ with everything we are, the world (not the earth) and its foolishness—even the foolishness of “religion”—becomes unattractive.

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Every thought, feeling, or piece of information coming our way is potential clutter. Even techniques of contemplation easily become the clutter that obstructs The Way to Christ. But he is kind to us. Every time we are full of thoughts, ideas, and activities he withholds the blessing of his Trost and we realise our emptiness again. The poor in spirit, only the truly poor in spirit, own the Kingdom of Heaven.

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To memorise rules and receive instruction (good and necessary though they be) does not take us through the veil. We do better to let go of our busy thoughts and “fix our eyes” on him (Hebrews 12:2).

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There are good times in Andacht and there are times when nothing happens—even the little Trost we may have getting taken away. Then we sit flat on the desert with Job: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15).

Feeling nothing, hearing nothing, seeing nothing at all. It is the situation we may fear more than anything else—the death of our “prayer life.” We may try desperately to deny it, or to cover it up with our imaginations. But when we relax and accept it for what it is, it no longer scares us. Emptiness before Christ, even though painful, is a pleasure in its own way. It is one form of reality.

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Every summer our customers from the city, many who had come to Canada from Germany and Eastern Europe after World War II, brought visitors to our farm. They loved my mother's garden. Some helped us pick strawberries or watched us milk by hand. Some rode with us to the fields on our hay wagons. One couple, in appreciation for a visit in our home, left us a crystal decanter brought with them from the Ruhrgebiet.

My mother, very appreciative (but not knowing for sure what to make of something that "nice"), set it behind her best dishes in the corner cupboard of the visitors' room. Not infrequently, in from the barn before dinner was ready, or on Sunday mornings when we had no meeting, I would take it out.

Sunlight streaming through the decanter from the great east window of the visitors' room surrounded me in heavenly colours. I had never seen the beauty of a prism before. But when my mother brought a bottle of wild cherry brandy home from Buffalo, New York (liquors were cheaper there), and I poured it in, it disappointed me. The *Brandtwein* looked beautifully red, held up to the light. But no more heavenly colours filled the room, and the decanter left only a shadow instead.

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The wine of spiritual ecstasy may delight us, but fortunately it does not last. When we are empty the light may fill us, and shine through our transparency to gladden those around us again.

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Emptiness before Christ is a sure hit. It is a guarantee. If all else fails—if streams of grace do not flow over us, if our hearts do not glow nor our inner beings contract in paroxysms of love—we can always feel empty. That is a good way to feel before Christ.

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If what we believe does not give room for occasional, frequent, or even permanent emptiness, we believe wrong. Only in true emptiness does true faith—believing without seeing—begin to operate. God forbid we should whirl forever through miraculous answers to prayer, great revivals, successes in church building, or the advance of whatever we promote and do. Great saints have always lived in the desert.

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Below the moon, hanging still in a tropical night, not a vehicle rumbled nor a shadow moved along the streets of Paramaribo. At the end of the Burenstraat (where Rust en Vrede meets the Commewijne) stood the shop of A.G. Abboud, Lebanese merchant, its slate roof touched with silver light from above.

Through the windows of his shop I saw his goods in the moonlight: bolts of cloth, rows of thread on spools, lace and rick-rack on a frame, tin dippers, a tea pot, and egg beaters hanging from the ceiling.

We waited, on a brick sidewalk across from great trees along the Burenstraat, for our ride to Wageningen and Coronie.

On the second story of A. G. Abboud's colonial house, tucked between others even taller and steeper along the crooked street, flower pots and hanging plants graced a full-length veranda. From a landing on the third floor (did a married son or grand-daughter live there?) hung clothes.

"Te koop," I read on a sign beside the door.

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The Way, for as often as it leaves us perplexed, empty, and in need, is a way of unending delight, for precisely into that emptiness the Lord Christ may put whatever wants to, again and again.

8

Abandoned

Years after we began to help with the spring cleaning, we learned why the older girls paid so much attention to the Sauberstube. It was not the empty room we had supposed. In its immaculate order—free of intrusion by the rest of us in the furthest corner upstairs—they awaited the most important encounters of their lives.

My youngest sister, only three years older than I, made the discovery and told me with wild excitement in the barn: "*Hast gwißt? Hast gwißt? Die Nancy hat ein Kerl!*" (Did you know? Did you know? Nancy has a boyfriend!)

I met the news with mixed feelings. Nancy, my oldest sister, was soft-spoken, neat, and loving. She taught us songs and had helped to care for us as long as we could remember. Every time we opened our eyes at the table, after silent prayer, I looked across at her. She was beautiful, I thought, in her plain clothes and the prospect of her leaving brought sadness. But much joy came with it.

We liked the boy that came to see Nancy. We had known him, the son of a widow, for a long time. He helped my older brothers with the ploughing. While the horses rested on the headland he played with us, even though he was already grown, and he could walk on his hands.

For several years Nancy waited on him, every so often, in the clean room. We knew that she met him there in her Sunday clothes, even though we never saw them together, or found out when he came after we already slept.

We held their *Hochzeit* ("high time," marriage feast) at our house on the last day of January, 1973. The first cutters and sleighs arrived before sun-up, clouds of vapour rising from the teams, and runners crunching through the frozen snow. It was -11° C.

Young men put up the horses. Every guest received a small cake and a little glass of wine at the door. All day long we celebrated, the bridal pair sitting like king and queen with a court of attendants, upstairs. We served California grapes on platters, two large meals, and special desserts, chilled in the snow. The older men sat in circles and talked. The women, without their children (cared for in other homes for the day) flitted about, upstairs and down, like so many happy girls. The young people sang and after the second meal—where my sister and her new husband ate from the same plate with much merriment—they cleared the floor and the *Hochzeitsspiel* began. Lamps lit every room in our large house standing among spruce trees laden deep with snow. The younger guests stayed until midnight, and later.

But the next day Nancy left home. My parents took her chest, her rugs, her quilts, her dishes and chairs on the green spring wagon. We waved through tears as she followed them, with her new husband, out the lane.

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The clean room, for all the careful attention they gave it, was only a step along the way. Only a foretaste of infinitely greater and better things to come, and my sisters, after they married, never used it again.

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Neither did Aaron, and the priests of Solomon's temple after they went to be with the Lord, miss its Most Holy Place.

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When we discover Gemeinschaft with Christ we easily think it the height of human joy. We think it the ultimate experience. But—like the first time we are smitten with human love—it is only the beginning.

We do well to watch what we say.

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We easily put what happens to us in rigid form, expecting it to happen the same way again and again—and to others like it did to us. This is the fatal flaw of “Revivalism” and every experience focused on experience itself. We can only revive emotions so many times. We can only hold “incredible meetings” so many years in a row before they turn fully credible (repeat performances) and passé.

But with Christ, and in the “Jesus Tradition” (poverty, contemplation, the “Jesus Prayer”) watered for two thousand years from the spring of inner Gemeinschaft with him, we may flourish and keep on bearing fruit forever.

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The Jesus Tradition, for two thousand years, has borne the Church—not vice versa.

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We do well to remember, on finding our way to the veil, that our route is not the “right” or “only” one. However we found it is a special miracle of grace (mine partially described in this book). Everyone’s journey varies, and that does not matter. But there is only one veil, and one seat of mercy behind it.

“I am the gate,” said Yahshua. “Everyone that enters through me will be saved.”

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We may use our personal shortcut to Christ (whatever Andacht we come up with) frequently and with great joy, as soon as we overcome the urge to set it as a pattern for all.

When we learn to respect and appreciate the experience of others we may enjoy what all have received in spiritual community.

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While in the process of discovery we may feel a great urge to speak and write. The “testimony urge.” But we do well, if new in the matter, to testify primarily with our lives.

Books and articles about The Way constantly appear by people finding their way onto it. But once we are on it for real, we may discover the futility of writing what is beyond words, and fall speechless, like untold numbers that have walked on it before.

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It is not important that we get everything described or told. What we discover is what untold numbers have discovered before us.

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We may rest in Gemeinschaft with Christ. Even though he asks us to “go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature” we may depend on the Word. The Word will speak, independently of us, to every man. The Light that came to us will enlighten all men, and to it, if we live in peaceful community, we bear witness.

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“By this all men will know that you are my disciples,” Yahshua said, “if you love one another.”³

³ John 13:35

“May they be made perfect in one,” Yahshua prayed to his Father, “to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”⁴

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We may stop being “great fountains of wisdom,” desperate “saviours” running to and fro as if heaven and earth depended on us.

We may admit our emptiness so Christ may fill us again and again. We may beg. Then, even though we have nothing to give, we may have something to share.

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Twenty-five years after my sister’s wedding I visited southern Ontario. In a borrowed car, on a wet day in the fall, I hurried through St. Agatha and Rummelhardt where in the buggy, beside my father, I rode to the city many times. At Fischer-Hallman Road I stopped on Erb Street. The David Eby cemetery—not one farm around it remained. The houses with long porches, summer kitchens, wash houses, and woodsheds that I had known, the barns, bush lanes, orchards, thorn trees along fence rows, even the hills themselves seemed to have vanished under a strange city as far as I could see in every direction, and an industrial park.

For a minute I sat and stared, unbelievably, at the little Mennonite graveyard with its markers inscribed in German. But the light turned (A traffic light? Here?) and a surge of Japanese cars on wet pavement swept me downtown.

I left a book with a friend on Victoria Street in the city centre, relatively unchanged. At the University of Waterloo I parked my car and spent a few hours in from the rain in the brightly-lit library upstairs at Conrad Grebel College. Some of the books I pulled out felt familiar in my hands.

⁴ John 17:23

Past my birthplace, the KW Hospital on King Street, and Waterloo Square. Suddenly the familiar ended again and I found myself lost in the loops of a new freeway that left me, within minutes, out in the country and close to “home.” I took the gravel road past what had been our meetinghouse, and the willows where I walked to school. A few ex-members, they tell me, still meet there on Sunday mornings during the summer.

Where our young spruces had stood I saw tall haggard trees. The creek, along what was the horse pasture and where we watched the geese in the spring, stood choked in weeds. Down from the barn I parked the car and waded through wet grass in fields that no longer had fences, to where the south creeks came together. But “Mont St.-Michel” was gone. One of the creeks, in fact, was gone and replaced with a drainage tile.

I did not stop at the house. I just drove slowly by and looked up at its sightless windows—one of them that used to be mine, by the Norway maple, and the large one to the east where my sister sat with her boyfriend in what used to be the clean room.

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After my last visit to where I spent my childhood in southern Ontario I have no desire to return. None of us live there anymore. We younger ones have moved to several countries and chosen widely different ways of life. Even my oldest sister, still with the Team People, left the area. Her husband, the boy that could walk on his hands, became a leader in their congregation, and the Lord blessed their marriage with five sets of twins and six other children.

Thinking of her, and what has taken place since that cold day in January, 1973, something else has become clear to me. What happens to everything and every place we have known does not matter. *Es macht nichts aus!* (It makes no difference.) The more completely we become detached from what is not real—transformed from landed gentry to paupers—the better.

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“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”⁵

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Even what happens to the clean room makes no difference.

On what everything depends is who meets us there—that he knows us, and that we may go, after the Hochzeit, with him.

9

After The Meeting

Emptiness, night, sin, estrangement, loss, failure, poverty, and death—not pleasant but real. The time comes when anything less than absolute reality no longer satisfies or even interests us. That is why the discalced Carmelites liked to eat with skulls sitting among the food on their tables. But reality only begins here.

Three men, my friend David and I married and nine thousand kilometres from our wives and children, stayed for the night at Ancud, on the windblown north coast of Chiloé.

An island.

Early, on the Lord’s Day, I sat inside plate glass windows facing the sea. It was too wet and cold for a walk. The owner of the hospedaje—*Kumb Mogen Chi Ruka Butawapi* he called it in Mapudungun—let us use its low kitchen, off a two storey dining room, all in

⁵ 2 Corinthians 2:18

natural wood with a balcony where light came in through a glass front and windows along the peak.

We were the only guests around. At a table where Indian artefacts stood by the fireplace, we met for morning prayers and a song:

From every stormy wind that blows, from every swelling tide of woes,
There is a calm, a sure retreat; 'Tis found beneath the mercy seat.

There is a place where Jesus sheds the oil of gladness on our heads,
A place than all besides more sweet; It is the blood-stained mercy seat.

There is a scene where spirits blend, where friend holds fellowship with friend;
Though sundered far by faith they meet around one common mercy seat.

Ah! whither could we flee for aid, when tempted, desolate, dismayed;
Or how the hosts of hell defeat, had suffering saints no mercy seat?

There, there on eagle wings we soar, where sin and sense molest no more;
And heav'n comes down our souls to greet, and glory crowns the mercy seat.⁶

Around the seat of mercy, at Kumb Mogen Chi Ruka Butawapi, we celebrated
Gemeinschaft with Christ and others.

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When the veil begins to recede we may think ourselves in ecstasy, alone with Christ.
But like mist before the rising sun, it not only recedes. It wafts further and further into the
distance as the music of heaven breaks upon us.

⁶ Hugh Stowell, 1828

Faintly at first, but clearer and stronger as our ears become attuned, ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. . . .” And as our eyes grow accustomed to the light, “lo, a great multitude that no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stands before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes and palms in their hands.”

* * * * *

Limits vanish, bonds break, the heavens open, in Gemeinschaft with Christ.

And we meet his bride, the Church, for the first time. Not the imaginary church of denominations, committees, and names, but the real. Shining clear through the haze of the centuries, we see her, the women in the wilderness, never drowned by the dragon, never tricked by the whore, never cast down, never destroyed though all hell prevails against her. The helpless, bride—an innumerable host of the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame⁷—that he has snatched from the great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns.⁸

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From the east and the west we beggars come to the marriage feast of the Lamb.⁹ Tax collectors and prostitutes, wretched enough to have believed in him.¹⁰ The poor.¹¹ Many from Tyre and Sidon, even from wicked Sodom, find mercy with us on the Day of Judgement.

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⁷ Luke 14:21

⁸ Revelation 12

⁹ Matthew 8:11, 22:10, Ephesians 2:6, Revelation 19:7

¹⁰ Matthew 21:31

¹¹ Matthew 5:3

From the east, Hermas (2'd century), who wrote:

The angel of righteousness is tender and chaste, gentle, and calm. When he begins to stir in your heart, he speaks to you at once about justice, purity, holiness, and self-control. He tells you all just deeds and glorious virtues. When these impulses stir your heart, you may know that the angel of righteousness is with you.

If you are patient, the Holy Spirit that lives in you will remain pure. No shadow of hostile evil spirits will fall on him, but dwelling in a wide open room he will rejoice and be glad. . . . The tender Spirit is not used to living with evil spirits or with harshness. He departs from the person in whom they dwell and seeks another place where gentleness, patience, and quietness are at home.

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Anthony (3'd century, Egypt):

Remember him who gives death and life. Hate the world and all that is in it. Hate all peace that comes from the flesh. Renounce this life, so that you may be alive to God.

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John Chrysostom (4'th century, Byzantium)

It is always proper, but even more so at this time, to say: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

Where is the gay torchlight now? Where are the clapping hands, the dances, the assemblies and the festivals? Where are the green garlands and curtains floating in the breeze? Where is the cry of the town, the cheers of the hippodrome, and the

roar of noisy spectators? All that is gone. A wind blew. The leaves came down and the tree stands bare, its trunk and branches trembling. Indeed, the storm that struck it was so fearfully strong it threatened to tear up and shatter it completely.

Where now are the friends, those that pretended to be something when they were not, and those that followed the fashions? Where are the suppers and feasts? Where the swarm of people hanging around to have a good time? Where is the wine that sat around for the taking? Where are the cooks and the beautifully decorated tables they served? What happened to everything done with words and ways to please?

All of this was imaginary. It was nothing but a dream. Now that day has come they have vanished. They were spring flowers, but now that spring has ended they have died. They were a shadow and the shadow has fled. They were smoke and the smoke has disintegrated into thin air. They were bubbles and they burst. They were cobwebs now swept away. So all we have left to sing is "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

Oh that these words were written on every wall, on everyone's clothing, in the markets and in peoples' home, on signs by the side of the road, on doors and over entry ways! Oh that they were written in everyone's conscience, so that we might see them in everything we do!

While engaged in this deceptive business of life, this wearing of masks and play-acting that so many take for the truth, I wish that every one of you would bring these words to the attention one of another. I wish that you would repeat them every day, at dinner and at supper, and at every meeting in between: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

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Gregory of Nyssa (4'th century, Cappadocia):

The things we pursue in life—opinion, honour, dignities, glory, fortune—have no existence except in our minds. They are the webs of the spiders of this world. . . . But those that rise in the spirit, with the flick of a wing, escape from them. Only those that are fat and lazy, like flies, remain stuck in their glue. They let themselves be taken and bound in the webs of honour, pleasures, praise, and a great many selfish desires, and fall prey to the beast that wants to devour them.

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Macarius (4'th century, Egypt):

No one enters the Spirit's love without becoming a stranger to all things of this age, without seeking Christ with all his heart and cutting himself loose from distractions, even of family and friends. . . . Power, fame, the praise of men, worldly companionship—nothing can divert him anymore from seeking the Kingdom of Heaven.

The one that loves Christ, even though he may have done ten thousand good works, thinks nothing of them. All he feels is insatiable desire for more. . . . All day long, hungering and thirsting, persevering in prayer, he longs for the mysteries of grace and the love of the heavenly Spirit. He longs with consuming desire for the bridegroom from heaven, and to join in holy fellowship with him. He lifts the face of his soul to gaze—unveiled—on the heavenly bridegroom in spiritual light that cannot be described. With total confidence, he comes into his presence, conformed to his death, and delivered like him from sin. Cleansed by the Spirit, sanctified in soul and body, he becomes a vessel fit to receive the heavenly anointing and entertain Christ, the true King. Then he is ready for eternal life, a clean dwelling place for the Holy Ghost.

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Gregory of Nazianzus (4'th century, Cappadocia)

Nothing attracts me more than to close the doors of my senses and escape from the flesh and the world—to become oriented within myself, having no further contact than necessary with human affairs. I desire to speak to myself and God, to live above visible things, to preserve in myself the impression of the heavenly, pure and unmixed with this lower world. I want to be and constantly become more like a clean mirror of God and heavenly things, enjoying already by hope the blessings of the world to come . . . having forsaken the earth already and having found my place through the Spirit in things beyond.

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“Dionysius” (5'th century, Greece):

Trinity! Higher than any being,
 any divinity, any goodness!
 Guide of Christians
 in the wisdom of heaven!
 Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
 Up to the farthest, highest peak
 Of mystic scripture,
 Where the mysteries of God's Word
 Lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
 In the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
 Amid the deepest shadow
 They pour overwhelming light
 On what is most manifest.
 Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
 They completely fill our sightless minds
 With treasures beyond all beauty.

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John of the Ladder (6'th century, Mount Sinai)

To be poor is to be free from care. It is to live without anxiety and travel light, far from sorrow, and faithful to the commandments. The poor one is lord of the world. He has handed all his cares to God and by his obtained, through faith, all men as his servants. If he needs anything he does not complain, and accepts what comes his way as from the Lord's hand. In his poverty he has become a son of detachment and sets no value on anything he has.

If you truly love God and long for the kingdom to come, if you are truly pained by your faults, mindful of punishment and judgement to come, and truly afraid to die, then you will not become attached, anxious, or concerned about money, possessions, family relationships, worldly glory, love and brotherhood, or anything else on earth. All worry about one's condition, even for one's body, will be pushed aside. Stripped of all worldly concerns, you will turn to Christ.

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Barsanuphius (7th century, Greece):

Without the help of God's grace within, we do our outer works of righteousness in vain. Only an inner change, brought about by anguish of heart, brings purity. This in turn, brings true inner silence. Inner silence keeps us humble, and humility makes us the dwelling place of God. When God moves in, he drives demons and passions out and we become his temple—holy, filled with light, purity and grace. Blessed is the one who sees Christ in this temple . . . and who prays with weeping before him.

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Isaac of Nineveh (8'th century, Mesopotamia):

Grace begins to work within us, and to draw us toward life, by striking us with the temporary, passing, nature of our lives. This brings us to contempt for the world, and the first stirrings of heavenly life within us. God wants us to see life. And if we do not suppress it by clinging to worldly things—if we look always and only to him—that feeling may grow until it overcomes us with emotions no tongue can describe.

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Symeon the Younger (10'th century, Byzantium)

Suddenly I saw him in my house [when I was fourteen years old]. In among the everyday things he appeared and just like that he came into me and I became joined to him. There was nothing between us anymore. He leaped into me as fire into iron, or light through glass. He made me like fire and light and I became what I had only seen from afar. I do not know how to tell you about this miracle. I do not know how he came into me, but now I am one with him. The light shines on me. It throws the heavens wide open. It drives away the night and reveals all things. I see nothing but the light and it tear me away from all that is visible, from all that one can feel.

The One that is above heaven, the One that nobody has ever seen, enters my spirit without leaving the heavens, without dividing the night or splitting the air. He comes without shattering the roof of our house, or breaking through anything, and light pours into the middle of my heart, although it remains like it was. O holy secret! The light lifts me above everything. And even though I am in the middle of everything, I am outside them, and I do not even know if I am in my body or not. Now I am in that place where there is only light, and where the light is simple, and in keeping my eyes on it I emerge in simplicity and innocence.

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Gregory Palamas (14'th century, Greece):

Since the Word of God has brought the kingdom of heaven close to us, let us not distance ourselves from it by leading an unrepentant life. Let us rather flee the wretchedness of those that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, bearing instead the fruits of repentance: a humble disposition, compunction and spiritual grief, a gentle and merciful heart that loves righteousness and pursues purity, peaceful, peace-making, patient in toil, glad to endure persecution, loss, outrage, slander, and suffering for the sake of truth. For the kingdom of heaven, that is, the King of heaven—unspeakably generous—is within us, and through acts of repentance and patient endurance we may cling to him. We love him because he loves us so much.

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Tikhon Zadonsky (18'th century, Russia):

To pray is not to stand and bow with your body or to read written prayers. One can pray at all times, in all places, by the mind and spirit. One can lift up the mind and heart to Christ while walking, sitting, working, in a crowd or alone. Unlike ours, Christ's door is always open. We can always say to him in our hearts: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy, on us sinners!"

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Ignaty Bryanchanninov (19'th century, Russia)

The one that serves God must keep his thoughts from wandering by calling without ceasing on the name of Jesus and by guarding against mental idleness. Without allowing thoughts or images to detract him, he must constantly return to Jesus like a ship returns to its harbour. Jesus most certainly watches out for those who stay in contact with him.

Let us not fear, we who pray the Jesus prayer! Let us not fear the winds nor the waves! By winds I mean thoughts from the devil and imaginations. By waves I mean the storms of passion those thoughts arouse. In the midst of the wildest storm we will keep on. We will persevere with courage and weeping, crying out to Jesus. He will rebuke the waves and bring calm. Having seen the almighty power of Jesus we will worship him and say: “You are indeed the son of God!” (Matt. 14:33).

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John of Kronstadt (19th century, Russia):

When you are praying, watch over yourself so that not only your outward man prays, but your inward one also. Though you be sinful beyond measure, pray anyway. Pay no attention to the devil’s attempts at distracting you, but remember the abyss of the Saviour’s mercy and love to mankind. The devil will try to make the Lord seem unmerciful to you, but remember his own words, full of hope for us: “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away,” and “Come unto Me, all that labour and are heavy laden—with the provocations of the devil—and I will give you rest.”

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Fyodor Dostoyevsky (19th century, Russia), the elder Zossima speaking in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

In my youth long ago, nearly forty years ago, I travelled all over Russia . . . and we stayed one night on the bank of a great navigable river with some fishermen. A good-looking peasant lad, about eighteen, joined us. He had to hurry back next morning to pull a merchant’s barge along the bank. I noticed him looking straight before him with clear and tender eyes. It was a bright, warm, still July night, a cool mist rose from the broad river, we could hear the splash of a fish. The birds were still. All was hushed and beautiful, everything praying to God. Only we two were not sleeping, the lad and I, and we talked of the beauty of the world of God’s and of the

great mystery of it. Every blade of grass, every insect, ant, and golden bee, all so marvellously know their path. Thought they have not intelligence, they bear witness to the mystery of God and continually accomplish it themselves. I saw the dear lad's heart was moved. He told me that he loved the forest and the forest birds. . . . "I know nothing better than to be in the forest," said he, "though all things are good."

"Truly," I answered him, "all things are good and fair, because all is truth. Look," said I, "at the horse, that great beast that is so near to man, or the lowly, pensive ox, which feeds him and works for him. Look at their faces. What meekness, what devotion to man, who often beats them mercilessly. What gentleness, what confidence and what beauty! It is touching to know that there is no sin in them, for all—all except man—are sinless, and Christ has been with them before us."

"Why," asked the boy, "is Christ with them too?"

"It cannot but be so," said I, "since the Word is for all. All creation and all creatures, every leaf is striving toward the Word, singing glory to God, weeping to Christ, unconsciously accomplishing this by the mystery of their sinless life. Yonder," said I, "in the forest wanders the dreadful bear, fierce and menacing, and yet innocent in it." And I told him how once a bear came to a great saint who had taken refuge in a tiny cell in the wood. And the saint pitied him, went up to him without fear, and gave him a piece of bread. "Go along," said he, "Christ be with you," and the savage beast walked away meekly and obediently, doing no harm. And the lad was delighted that the bear had walked away without hurting the saint and that Christ was with him too. "Ah," said he, "how good that is, how good and beautiful is all God's work!" He sat musing softly and sweetly. I saw he understood. And he slept beside me a light and sinless sleep. May God bless youth! And I prayed for him as I went to sleep. Lord send peace and light to your people!

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Anthony de Mello (20'th century, India):

The disciples were full of questions about God.

Said the master, “God is the Unknown and the Unknowable. Every statement about him, every answer to your questions, is a distortion of the truth.”

The disciples were bewildered. “Then why do you speak about him at all?”

“Why does the bird sing?” asked the master.

The bird does not sing because it has a statement, but because it has a song. We may understand the words of scholars, but the words of the master are not to be understood. They are to be listened to as one listens to the wind in the trees and the sound of the river and the song of the bird. They will awaken something in the heart that is beyond all knowledge.

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Catherine de Hueck Doherty (20th century, Russia, Canada)

I have come to do the will of the Father. Yes, that is what I am going to do. I have made the decision. . . . At this moment a strange, indescribable sensation comes over me. Because in accepting the will of the Father I surrender all things to him—father, mother, brothers, sisters, relatives, the life that I lead—in short, everything. Once I have decided to put my will into the immense sea of Christ’s will, I seem to come to a moment of non-existence, and there are no ways in which I can put it into words. It is as if by total surrender of my will I also surrender my body, my mind, my senses, everything that is me, and I am as if I were not. . . .

Suddenly I realise that I have been changed in the twinkling of an eye. Now indeed I am free. I am not worried about anything anymore. I am like a bird soaring in the air and all things are mine because all things are God’s and I am his too.

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From the West, Hippolytus (3'd century, Italy):

The soul is like a timid deer, chased continually about on the earth, by death. Death tests his power upon it. Today it is in the Kingdom of Light. Tomorrow it is thrown into misery, plunged deep into pain and tears. Straying and lost in the maze, it seeks for an exit in vain. But Jesus says, "Oh Father, look on this tormented being! See how it roams the earth in sorrow, far from your breath. It seeks to flee the bitter chaos, yet does not know the way of escape. Send me down, Oh Father, to save it! I will go down with the seals in my hand, striding through the aeons, opening all mysteries. . . . I will bring to it the secret of the Holy Way."

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John Cassian (4'th century, Gaul):

Sometimes the soul hides itself in complete silence. And in that profound quietness the amazement of sudden illumination may choke all sounds of words, the overawed spirit either keeping its feelings to itself or pouring them out to God with sounds that words cannot express. At other times the soul may be filled with such overwhelming conviction and grief that it cannot express it except by floods of tears.

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Gregory (6'th century, Italy)

There is a difference between spiritual and earthly pleasure. As long as we do not enjoy them, earthly pleasures look very attractive. But when we plunge into them they become repulsive.

Spiritual joys, on the other hand, do not look interesting as long as we do not know them. But once we begin to experience them, they overcome us with a desire for more. The more we enjoy them, the more we desire them. With pleasures of the body, it is desire that delights us and realisation that disappoints. With pleasures of the soul, desire is weak but spiritual experience is a source of the greatest joy.

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Radbod (10'th century, Netherlands):

Hunger and thirst, Oh Christ, for sight of you,
 Came between me and all the feasts of earth.
 Give me of yourself, the bread, of yourself, the wine,
 You, sole provision for the unknown Way!
 Long-hunger wasted the world wanderer
 But with sight of you he may be satisfied

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Johannes Eckhart (13'th century, Germany):

Do everything from inner motivation of the soul. . . . If you think to get more out of God through religious offices and devotions, in sweet retreats and solitary prayers, than while working by the fireplace or in the barn, you may as well think you could seize God, wrap a mantle around his head, and stick him under your table! To seek God by ritual is to get the ritual and lose God in the process, for he hides behind it. On the other hand, to seek God with no outward ceremony is to take him as he is, and by doing that you may lives by the Son and become Life yourself.

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Walter Hilton (14'th century, England):

The contemplative life has three parts. The first is the knowledge of God acquired by reason, by the teaching of man, or by the study of the Holy Scriptures. One can have this knowledge without spiritual affections or inward taste of the Holy Ghost.

This knowledge is good, but it is only a figure of true contemplation, because it has no spiritual taste of God, or that inner sweetness no one can feel unless he is deeply in love. Both good and bad people can have this knowledge. Heretics, hypocrites, and those living in sin, often have more of it, in fact, than true Christians. Paul speaks of it saying, “Even if I know all things, yes and if I understand all mysteries, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

The second part of contemplation lies in emotions without the understanding of spiritual things. Simple and unlearned people often feel them. They may suddenly be moved to tears when thinking about God. They feel great stirrings of heart, and I suppose one may say they are in love for the moment. But it passes away.

The third, and perfect degree of contemplation, is that which lies in knowledge and emotion combined—that is, in perfect knowing and loving of God. When this happens, the soul is cleansed from sin and transformed into the image of Jesus. The Lord himself visits the soul and takes it up from all earthly and fleshly affections, from vain thoughts and imaginations of all bodily things, as if forcibly ravished out of the bodily senses. Then we are illuminated by the grace of the Holy Spirit to see the Truth, that is God, and also spiritual things with a soft, sweet, burning love for him. . . . The beginning of this contemplation may be felt in this life, but the fullness of it is kept in the bliss of heaven.

Of this third and perfect degree of contemplation, Paul says: “He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.”¹²

¹² 1 Corinthians 6:17

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Heinrich Suso (14'th century, Germany):

Listen to me, all you that love the world: I had her too, but she ran off on me! She was nothing but a hallucination. And where is she now? What happened to all the promises she made me and the dreams we shared?

What would I have, Miss World, even though I had clung to you for a thousand years? Everything is gone! Just like that, in a moment you vanished! That is what you are like.

I thought I held you in my arms, but you left me sit. Now I see how treacherous you are. If a fellow does not want to let you go in a nice way, you leave in a bad way. Well, you murderess, now I tell you farewell for good! May God be merciful to you! Deceive whom you will but you will never deceive me again.

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The Cloud of Unknowing (anonymous, 14'th century, England):

Now when I speak of [God hidden in] darkness, or a cloud, do not picture a cloud formed of vapours that float in the air, or darkness like you have in your house at night when your candle is out. Such darkness or such a cloud you can easily imagine. But leave that alone. I mean nothing of the sort. When I say "darkness" I mean the inability of knowing. What you do not know or have forgotten is dark to you, because you cannot see it with your spiritual eyes. For this reason, I call what is between you and God, not a cloud of the air, but a cloud of unknowing.

If ever you come to this cloud, and begin to live and work in it as I suggest, just as this cloud of unknowing is above you, between you and God, in the same way you must put beneath you a cloud of forgetting, between you and all creatures that have

ever been made. It seems to you perhaps, that you are very far from him, because this cloud of unknowing is between you and your God. However if you give it proper thought, you are certainly much further from him when you do not have the cloud of forgetting between you and all creatures that have ever been made.

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Richard Rolle (14'th century, England):

Oh everlasting Love, enflame my soul with the love of God so that nothing save his embraces may set my heart on fire. Oh good Jesus, who shall make me to feel thee here who mayest now be neither felt nor seen? Pour out thyself into the depths of my soul. Enter my heart and fill it with thy sweetness. Refresh my mind with the strong wine of thy love, that forgetting all evil and having only thee, I may be glad and rejoice in Jesus my God. Leave me not, most sweet Lord, but stay with me forever, for thy presence is my only comfort and apart from thee I am full of sorrow.

Oh Holy Ghost that givest grace where thou wilt, enter into my soul, and draw me to thyself. Transform the nature which thou hast given me by thy grace, that my heart, filled with thy joy, may despise the things of this world. May she receive spiritual gifts from thee, the giver, and entering by happiness into unspeakable light be all consumed by holy love. Burn up my inward parts and all my heart with the fire that burns forever on thine altar.

Come, I pray thee, through sweet and true joy! Come, most sweet and most desired! Come, my love who art my only comfort! Enter a soul that longs for thee. Inflame with thy divine fire all my heart. Enlighten my inmost parts with thy radiant light. Feed me with love!

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Theologia Germanica (14'th century, Germany):

Many say they have no peace or rest but so many crosses, trials, afflictions, and sorrows, that they have no idea how they shall make it through. This may indeed be how things appear. But the one that sees things clearly knows that true peace and rest do not depend on outward situations. . . . The peace that Christ gives is an inner peace. It overcomes every attack, every cross, oppression, suffering, misery, and humiliation, and lets those that follow him be joyful and patient in the midst of them. Everyone that earnestly desires it may have this true and eternal peace. Then what was bitter to him becomes sweet, and his heart shall remain unmoved in every situation, and after his life he may enter peace that is everlasting.

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Gerrit Groote (14'th century, Netherlands):

My son, you do well to be ignorant of many things and to consider yourself dead to the earth, a person to whom the whole world is crucified (Galatians 6:14). Many things also you must let pass by with a deaf ear, and think rather of what may contribute to your peace. It is much more profitable to turn your eyes away from what displeases you, and to let each one hold his own opinion, than to confront others with quarrelsome words. If you stand well with God and respect his judgement, it will not bother you at all if others get the best of you in an argument.

My son, I will teach you the way of peace and true freedom. Strive to do the will of others rather than your own. Always prefer to have less, rather than more. Seek in every way to hold the lowest place and to be submissive to everyone. Desire at all times that God's will may be accomplished. If this is what you do, you will have complete rest and peace.

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Nicholas Kempf (15'th century, Austria):

Four kinds of people, in the end, get to eat at the Lord's wedding feast—those that have humility like the poor, those that have patience like the crippled, those that are simple (rather than clever and argumentative) like the blind, and those that deny themselves in spirit and flesh like the lame.

The poor are the humble of spirit. The crippled are those that deny themselves, "losing their souls to find them." The blind live totally free from knowledge based on the mere sight and human perception. This sets them free from the created and sensual to cling to God in love. In popular speech [German as opposed to Latin] we call this *Abgeschiedenheit* (detachment, spirit of departure). We know that knowledge, even knowledge of the Scriptures, easily hinders us. How much more then, may useless or harmful reasoning, based on the senses hinder us? In last place, the lame are those that get around with the help of others, in spite of their handicap. Of these the Apostle says, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God." This willing surrender of self, this spirit of giving up, we call *Gelassenheit*.

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Nicholas of Cusa (15'th century, Germany):

The precise knowledge of tangible things surpasses human reason to such an extent that Socrates seemed to himself to know nothing except that he did not know. And the very wise Solomon maintained that all things are difficult and unexplainable, as did another man filled with the Spirit of God who maintained that wisdom and the seat of understanding are hidden from the eyes of all the living. . . . But we want to keep on learning, and that is not in vain, if we learn about our ignorance.

A man—even the most learned man—can come to nothing higher than to the perfect knowledge of the ignorance that is his. The more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be. . . . for in this understanding faith unfolds.

Where there is no faith there is no understanding . . . and perfect faith is the Truth. That is Jesus. John says that faith in the Word of God made flesh, leads us into the Truth and lets us become sons of God. . . . Although hidden from the wise, the very great and deep mysteries of God are revealed through faith in Jesus, to the small and humble inhabitants of the world. For Jesus is the one in whom all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.

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Catherine of Genoa (15'th century, Italy):

I see without sight, I understand without intelligence, I feel without feeling, I taste without taste. I know neither shape or form, yet without seeing, I see such indescribable glory that all words I have ever used to describe perfection, cleanness, or purity seem nothing but mockery and a fable in comparison. The sun that seemed bright to me before, is now dark. . . . For when the creature is cleansed, purified, and transformed in God, it sees purity and truth beyond what can be thought, seen (in the literal sense of the word), or spoken of.

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Luís de León (16'th century, Spain):

If one could describe with words or gestures the delight of the soul [with Christ], they could all be used, for all describe it in one way or another. It starts in a small way, but it becomes more and more wonderful until, like a ship with its sails fully spread, it glides across an ocean of pleasure, consumed at last in flames most wondrously sweet, that began with the sparks of love it received in its inmost being.

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Johannes Hut (16'th century, Germany):

When we receive the Word with a pure heart, through the Holy Ghost, it becomes flesh in us. At first the thought of this happening frightens us and causes us to tremble like Mary when the angel told her the will of God. But the Word must be born in us too. It cannot happen other than through pain, distress, and poverty inside and out. Then, when the Word is born and becomes flesh in us, we praise God for it and our heart is in peace. Then we become Christ's mother, his brothers, and his sisters.

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Peter Rideman (16th century, southern Germany, Moravia):

The one that loves God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength would rather die than continue, even for a little while, in senseless or unprofitable thought. He would rather be silent than bring dishonour to God's name through words and works of no value. . . . Love like this brings about what God wants done, and makes faith alive. The one that puts it to practise is born of God.

Love is like a fire. If one puts too much wood on it right away, it goes out. But after it gets going, the more one puts on, the higher it burns—spreading easily to burn houses and surrounding woods. Only where there is no wood does the fire die and get cold.

That is how love works. When it begins to burn within us, any little trouble or anxiety may put it out. But when it burns in great eagerness for God, the more temptations and troubles that come upon it, the louder and higher it roars, until it devours all injustice and wickedness around it. Only if we do not practice love, and if we grow lazy or careless, does it flicker out again, and our hearts grow cold. Then faith dies out and good works come to an end. Then we stand like withered trees fit for the fire, like Jesus says.

The spark of love is faith. Without faith there can be no love. The two belong so closely together that one cannot please God without the other.

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Valentin Crautwald (16th century, Silesia):

Christ himself is the spiritual, heavenly bread, certainly not to be broken with our natural teeth. You should not be so foolish as to believe that you can receive this living heavenly bread from the hands of men or that you can take his body and blood into your mouth and introduce them, through that, into your soul.

Rather, you may begin to receive Christ when you lift up our hearts to him, glorified in heaven. If you go begging to heaven, call on God your Father in the spirit of faith and wish to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. Then you may, by God's grace, send a small sack or basket with true faith toward heaven into the house of God where Christ is sitting at his right hand. He will fill your little sack or basket with bread and promptly return it to you. This is the spiritual bread that you may break with the teeth of faith.

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Marie Tessonier (16th century, France):

What I saw was without form or shape, yet it was beautiful and pleasant. It had no colour, yet the grace of all colours. It was not like the light of the sun, yet it shone marvellously, and all earthly and spiritual light came from it. What I saw took up no space, yet it filled everything. It did not move, yet it animated all creation.

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John of the Cross (16th century, Spain):

In order to have pleasure in everything,
 Desire to have pleasure in nothing.
 In order to arrive at possessing everything,
 Desire to possess nothing.
 In order to arrive at being everything,
 Desire to be nothing.
 In order to arrive at knowing everything,
 Desire to know nothing.

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R. Wilkinson (17th century, England):

I would not have any think that I deny the Scriptures, the ordinances, Christ's coming in the flesh, or the Kingdom after death. . . . My aim is to set things in their proper place and to bring souls to see their true centre. . . . The saint's rest is not in any of these things, but in the sum and substance of them all, that is Christ in the Spirit, coming in us to be Life, Glory, Light, and Happiness. He is the saint's rest.

God, in these days, is uncovering the mask of all creatures and stripping them naked. . . . He is annihilating creatures and bringing them to spiritual death. He is laying low mountains . . . even to a loss and silence, confusion and darkness, so that now their light is darkness, their wisdom folly, their life death . . . and now they are made to wait in silence as I was also made to do.

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Sarah Jones (17th century, England):

Sink down into the eternal Word and rest there, and not in any manifestation that proceeds from the Word, for it is the Word of the Lord that shall endure forever. . . .

This eternal Word was before any manifestation. It is the Word the builders rejected that has become the head of the corner.

Reason not with flesh and blood, nor with the voice of the Serpent, for if you do, you will darken the council of God in yourselves, but in the power of the Lord shut him [the Serpent] out. . . . Stand still and see the salvation of God, which is in the Light of his Covenant that will stretch forth the hand of his power, as he did to Peter when he feared the proud waves would prevail over him.

Cease thy mourning, thou weeping babe that mourns in secret for manifestations of thy beloved . . . for I can testify unto thee by experience, whosoever thou art in that state, that he is bringing thee nearer to him. That was but milk with which he fed thee whilst thou wast weak. But now he will feed thee with the Word from whence that milk proceedeth. Live at home with Jacob, which is to retire daily into thy mind. Though the gadding, hunting Esau persecutes thee for it, thou shalt receive the blessing. . . . Oh the glorious day of the Lord God hasteth to be revealed to those who are kept faithful in his Word.

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Miguel de Molinos (17th century, Spain)

The soul should advance in love, leaving all understanding behind. Let her love God as he is, and not as her imagination says he is, and frames him to her. And if she cannot know him as he is, let her love him without knowing him—under the veil of faith. Let her love him like a son that has never seen his father, but fully believing those that have described him, loves his father as if he had already seen him.

The soul that has come to the end of human reasoning should not exert herself, or struggle for more clear and exact knowledge. Even though she remains without the support of sensible consolations, in poverty of spirit and deprived of everything she might like to have, she should continue quiet, firm, and steadfast. She should let the

Lord do his work in her, even though she may feel abandoned, exhausted, and full of darkness. . . .

We think more highly of God by knowing that he is incomprehensible than by conceiving him under any image or created beauty, according to our rude understanding. Greater respect and love will flow from this confused, obscure, and negative perception, than from anything tangible or that can be clearly seen.

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J. J. Surin (17th century, France):

If we choose poverty of spirit for his sake, our Lord gives us richness of spirit. This poverty consists in seeking self in nothing and in having a faith that lets us, like Jesus, throw aside the approval and comfort of men, and all worldly advantages, to accept his cross.

When we do this, even without much reading, speculation, or worrying of the head, the fountain of eternal life breaks forth within us. Enlightenment comes to us, not in logical conclusions, but in a welling-up of grace, a river of peace, and torrents of blessing that awaken the latent fires of the soul until they leap in holy flame to the heavens.

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Blaise Pascal (17th century, France):

I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.

Everyone seeks diversion from thinking about what they are, either by some occupation that takes the mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion that

keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion. . . . That is why men are so fond of hustle and bustle, and why prison is such a fearful punishment. That is why the pleasures of solitude are so incomprehensible. It is, in fact, the main joy of being a king, because people are continually trying to divert him and procure him every kind of pleasure. A king is surrounded by people whose only thought is to divert him and stop him from thinking about himself, because, king though he is, he becomes unhappy as soon as he thinks about himself.

Men have a secret instinct driving them to seek external diversion and occupation, and this is the result of their constant sense of wretchedness. They have another secret instinct, left over from the greatness of our original nature, telling them that true happiness lies in rest and not in excitement. These two contrary instincts give rise to a confused plan buried out of sight in the depths of their soul, that leads them to seek rest by way of activity and always to imagine that the satisfaction they miss will come to them once they overcome certain obvious difficulties. . . . All our life passes this way. We seek rest by struggling against certain obstacles, and once they are overcome, rest proves intolerable. . . .

The only thing that consoles us for our miseries is diversion. And yet it is the greatest of our miseries, for it is that, above all, that prevents us thinking about ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to destruction. . . .

The Stoics say: "Withdraw into yourself, that is where you will find peace. But that is not true.

Others say, "Go outside. Look for happiness in some diversion." But that is not true. We may fall sick.

But happiness is neither without nor within. It is in God both without and within us.

George Fox (17th century, England):

Be still and silent from thy own wisdom, wit, craft, subtlety, or policy that would arise in thee, and stand single to the Lord, without any end to thyself. Then God will bless thee and prosper thee in his ways. . . . And if thy mind be stayed upon the Lord, thou wilt be kept in perfect peace, without any intent to thyself, to the glory of God. And there wilt thou feel no want, nor never a failing, nor forsaking, but the presence of the Lord God of life with thee. For now the state of this present age is, that the Lord is bringing his people into the life the Scriptures were given forth from, in which life people shall come to have unity with God, with the Scriptures and with one another, for the establishing of righteousness, truth and peace, in which is the Kingdom of God.

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Robert Barclay (17th century, England):

When people are gathered together, not merely to hear men, nor depend on them, but all are inwardly taught to stay their minds on the Lord and wait for his appearance in their hearts, the forward working of the spirit of man is stayed and hindered from mixing itself with the worship of God.

This form of worship is so naked and void of all outward and worldly splendour that all occasion for man's wisdom to be exercised in superstition and idolatry hath no lodging there, and so there being also an inward quietness and retiredness of mind, the witness of God ariseth in the heart, and the light of Christ shineth whereby the soul cometh to see its own condition. And there being many joined together in this same work, there is an inward travel and wrestling. And also as the measure of grace is abode in, an overcoming of the power and spirit of darkness. And thus we are often greatly strengthened and renewed in the spirits of our minds without a

word. And we enjoy and possess the holy fellowship and communion of the body and blood of Christ, by which our inward man is fed.

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Hans de Ries (17'th century, Netherlands):

We have everything we want in Christ and him crucified—our salvation, our food, drink, and whatever else we may need. If you think you can find this somewhere else, in the letter of Scripture, the written Word, or in the sacraments of water, bread, or wine, you are deceived and work in vain. The Scriptures were not crucified for us. They did not die for us, but Christ. For this reason our redemption does not lie in the Scriptures but in Christ who suffered and died so that we might have everything we might possibly need for our salvation.

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Gerhard Tersteegen (18'th century, Germany), translated by John Wesley:

Thou hidden Love of God whose height
Whose depth unfathomed no man knows,
I see from far thy beauteous light
I sigh within for thy repose.
My heart is pained, nor can it be
At rest, till it find rest in Thee.

Is there a thing beneath the sun
That strives with Thee my heart to share?
Tear it from thence and reign alone
Thou Lord of every motion there.
Then shall my heart from earth be free
When it hath found repose in Thee.

Each moment draw from earth away
 My heart, that lowly waits Thy call,
 Speak to my inmost soul and say:
 I am thy Love, thy God, thy All!
 To feel thy power, to hear thy voice,
 To taste thy love, be all my choice.

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Jeme Deknatel (18'th century, Netherlands):

This life is only the bud of our existence. It is the streak of dawn that announces our coming day. It is our dressing room. A curtain hangs across the stage on which the drama of our real lives has yet to unfold. Death alone will sweep that curtain away and allow the seed of our existence to spring forth in reality and light!

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The Community of True Inspiration (19'th century, Iowa):

Direct your eyes ever and only to Jesus, your beginning, aim, and goal. Count every word, thought, and work as done in the immediate presence of God. Give constant account to God, in sleeping and waking, eating or drinking, for whatever you do. Then you will see whether it is done in his love and fear.

Accustom yourself to being silent. Let your heart speak more than your tongue—that is, speak mostly with God. Bear all sufferings—both the inner and the outward—in silence. Tell God alone about your pain, and accept with deep respect and obedience whatever he lets happen to you.

Avoid useless words for they deprive your soul of strength. Flee from wicked, talkative, boastful, and vain companions. They will do nothing but infect and corrupt

you. Seek and love seclusion, concealment, and separation. Let every one seek to be the most humble. Flee ambition and exaltation of one over another. The smaller you become in your own eyes the better you will see the grace of God.

Think often of how you will die. Remember your time is short and you do not know when your last day will come. Use your time in the best way while it lasts.

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John Woolman (18'th century, New Jersey):

As the present appearance of things is not joyous, I have been much shut up from outward cheerfulness, remembering that promise, "Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord." As this from day to day has been revived in my memory, I have considered that his internal presence on our minds is a delight of all others the most pure, and that the honest-hearted not only delight in this but in the effect of it upon them.

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Christoph Blumhardt (19'th century, Germany):

It is a good thing that we have the privilege of being poor. We do not have in mind only the poverty of not knowing how we will be able to make ends meet. That, of course, is a part of it. But it is only secondary. Our truer poverty lies in our effort to achieve what God has in mind for us. It is there that we are indeed most poor.

Many people put all their effort into nonessentials. They concern themselves with things near at hand, seeking to make their own way and arrive at human joy: "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" It is this situation the Bible calls "being rich." These people, of course, are as poor as anyone. Yet, at least superficially, they are known as rich. In their relation to God, they act as though they

are rich. They gobble down every sweet that comes to hand, and when God comes with his nourishment they are already satisfied. They turn their backs and want nothing.

Strangely enough, it is these poorest of the poor that are called rich. And it is another group that is known as poor. These others have their minds set on something better, something higher, and in their striving they have concluded that man can be helped, in the end, only by God himself. When a person arrives at this realisation, he has made himself an utter pauper. No self-help here! If everything depends on God, then it simply does not depend on us. And the more a person becomes aware that things do not depend on himself but on God, the poorer he becomes. And thus the word becomes true: "Blessed are the poor, the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

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Søren Kierkegaard (19'th century, Denmark):

If I were a doctor allowed to prescribe one remedy for everything that is wrong in the world I would prescribe silence. As things are now it does no good to loudly proclaim the Word of God everywhere. No one can hear it. There is too much noise and activity. We must become silent.

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John Henry Newman (19'th century, England):

Do you want to be great? Make yourself little. There is a mysterious connection between real advancement and self-abasement.

If you minister to the humble and despised, if you feed the hungry, tend the sick, and comfort the distressed, if you bear with the forward, submit to insult, endure in

gratitude, and render good for evil, you gain power over the world and rise among its creatures. God has established this law. Thus he does his wonderful works. His instruments are poor and despised, the world hardly knowing their names, or not at all. They are busied about what the world thinks to be petty actions, and no one pays any attention to them. They are apparently set on no great works. Nothing is seen to come of what they do. They seem to fail. Even regarding matters of the faith they profess to desire, there is no natural and visible connection between their doings and sufferings and what they hope to attain.

But there is an unseen connection in the Kingdom of God. They rise by falling. Plainly so, for no condescension can be so great as that of our Lord Himself. Now the more they abase themselves the more they become like him and the more they become like him, the greater their power. . . .

When a man discerns in himself the most sin and humbles himself the most—when his comeliness seems to him to vanish away and all his graces to wither, when he feels disgust and revolt at the mere thought of himself, when he becomes dust and ashes, all foulness and odiousness in his own eyes—then he is rising in the kingdom of God.

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Lucie Christine, (19th century, France):

We went for a walk, fourteen of us. I notice that to associate with many Marthas, men and women, does not affect me (from the point of view of union with God). One leaves them to talk, putting in a word here and there, but in reality one remains quite free to continue in prayer. But to be with one Martha only, what a terrible thing! Being only two, one is obliged to talk nearly all the time. Assuredly this does not hinder one from being united to God. But to speak of him is not the same thing as to speak to him, and dare one speak of him as much and in the manner one would like?

For my part, I never dare tell anyone how much I love him, fearing lest people may be scandalised afterwards when they see all my imperfections. I find it a sort of martyrdom to remain thus shut up in myself, for it seems to me that were I to say what I think, I might contribute to make him loved, and this would be my greatest happiness. Certainly God alone, or a soul enlightened and inflamed by his Spirit, would have the charity to understand how it is that I love him so well and serve him so badly. It is therefore a real solace to be able to write this or sometimes to exchange spiritual confidences.

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G. K. Chesterton (20th century, England)

The one created thing we cannot look at is the one thing in the light of which we look at everything. Like the sun at high noon, mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own victorious invisibility. Detached intellectualism, by way of contrast, is like the moon—light without heat, and that only secondary reflected light.

That which transcends everything, and what men live by, stands like the sun in the sky. We are conscious of it as of a kind of splendid confusion. It is something both shining and shapeless, at once a blaze and a blur. But the circle of the moon is as clear and unmistakable, as recurrent and inevitable as Euclid's circle on a blackboard. The moon is utterly reasonable. It is also the mother of lunatics and has given to them all her name.

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David Petander (20th century, Sweden):

Just like the sun is far from the earth yet penetrates all darkness with its rays, the Christian should be far away from everything that belongs to this world

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Eberhard Arnold, (20'th century, Germany):

If we are to understand the mission of Jesus, we must understand the nature of the sun and of fire. Our sun is the central fire in the universe from which our planet gets its life. The sun's force of attraction gathers and holds together all the worlds that surround it. Its glow keeps us from dying of cold. Its warmth awakens life in plants and animals. Without its light, all life would perish in darkness. The tiny fraction of light-energy that our planet receives from the far distant sun is enough to engender and animate the boundless life that we know on the earth. Every manifestation of earth's power, every breath of wind, the water cycle, every movement of oceanic life, every beat of our heart, is the work of the sun. What bracing power it gives soul and body! Without it we fall prey to death.

We could call every organism of the earth a sunbeam come alive. Light, and the warmth proceeding from it, sustains all life.

Every light radiates from a source, the giver of its energy. True enlightenment has to reach the final goal of grasping the Light-Bearer himself. It is the nature of light to reveal itself directly and without intermediary. The more refraction and reflections the light has gone through, the more noticeably is it changed and weakened when we receive it. We have to dare to look the shining sphere straight in the face. We have to receive it into ourselves as it is.

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Max I. Reich ():

If a meeting is spiritually poor, dull, and empty, it is certainly more honest to be silent before God than to cover up the inward nakedness by a multiplicity of creaturely exercises. The silence is an eloquent appeal to the Source from which our help

comes to overflow into our empty cups. . . . It is not honest to give expression to exalted sentiments that are contradicted by one's actual condition. To sing of mountain-top joys, when actually in the valley; of the banquet when starving in the desert, of glorious liberty when in bondage to the lusts and cares of this passing world is not from the Spirit of Truth. It is much more becoming and much more likely to bring a meeting into tenderness and into the resultant sense of the breathings forth of divine consolations, to be silent in the confession of its need.

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Simone Weil (20th century, France):

All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style, and all faulty connection of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily, and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have wanted to be too active. We have wanted to carry out a search. . . . But we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them. We must wait until they come. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern the falsity.

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Philip Britts (20th century, England, Paraguay)

In this stillness

In this silence

Speak the stars

And speaks the sky

“Reconsider,

O my people,

All the things

You know me by.

Honeybee

And woods of orange,

Pineapple

And rice and maize,

Softest wings

Of sleep at night-time,

Strength for labour

Through the days.

Not that you

Should probe too deeply,

Burning mind

On mystery.

Not that you

Should strive to reach me

Climbing by

Intensity

What have you

To offer to me?

What is it

You feel I ask?

Reconsider,

O my people,

What you see

to be your task.

Not that you

Forever harp on

Things so clear

To me above.

Simple are my

Expectations.

All I ask

Is that you love.”

Love is clear,

And love is simple,

Quick to help

And slow to cease.

Love is gratitude

And patience.

Love is kindness,

Love is peace

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Thomas Merton (20'th century, France, United States):

Faith makes us believe truths that are beyond all proportion to human understanding and are only known in so far as they are accepted through Divine Revelation. "Hence it follows that for the soul this excessive light of faith which is given to it is thick darkness, for it overwhelms that which is great and does away with that which is little, even as the light of the sun overwhelms all other lights whatsoever, so that when it shines and disables our powers of vision they appear not to be lights at all" (John of the Cross).

It is only in this sense that faith is said to blind and darken the understanding. It is not that natural knowledge has no value in itself. But natural knowledge can no more serve to teach us the mysteries of God than a flashlight can help an owl to find its way about when it is dazzled by the light of high noon. The light of the sun blinds not only the owl but the flashlight, and he who wants to find his way to God must be led by the hand.

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Henri Nouwen, (20'th century, Netherlands):

There is a great difference between successfulness and fruitfulness. Success comes from strength, control, and respectability. A successful person has the energy to create something, to keep control over its development, and to make it available in large quantities. Success brings many rewards and often fame. Fruits, however, come from weakness and vulnerability. And fruits are unique. A child is the fruit conceived in vulnerability, community is the fruit born through shared brokenness, and intimacy is the fruit that grows through touching one another's wounds. Let us remind one another that what brings us true joy is not successfulness but fruitfulness.

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Kenneth Morse (20th century, United States):

Light comes to the individual and grace accompanies the light. We may yield on some point, or perform some act of obedience. One such yielding leads to another, and another. As we consider these steps in our own experience, we may think that conversion is gradual. Nevertheless, do not forget that these steps lead to a final consummation—perfect surrender. Unless we attain this consummation, the work is marred, unfinished, and worthless! Only when these steps lead us to the climax do they have value.

Individuals differ in their religious experience: the consummation stands out very clearly with some. Others may not know the day or the hour. Nevertheless, there is surely an instant when we truly pass from death to life, from darkness to light, from that unsaved state to salvation. . . . This is real conversion. Do not be satisfied with anything less.

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John Main (20th century, England, Canada):

One of the things we learn as we mature, as we go further along the path, is to be equally content with either form of silence: that is, with the infinite sense of Christ's presence or with the finite sense of his absence. It is harder for us at the beginning because we have not learned much about detachment. We have not reached the stage where we can be just as content with absence as with presence, and we are always looking for our meditations to satisfy us.

We are always looking to prove to ourselves that it works, that now we know God, now we have learned to live in his presence. But the purpose of the second form of

silence—his absence—is to purify us so that we learn to love God selflessly as he loves us. He teaches us to be strong in himself, strong in fidelity, and to ensure that we love God *for* himself and *in* himself and not only for any manifestations of his presence that satisfies us.

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Jean Vanier (20'th century, Canada):

When Jesus sent his disciples out on a mission, he told them to be poor, to take nothing with them. And he told them to do things that were impossible for them to do all by themselves. So it is for all missions. Communities and their members are called to be poor and to do impossible things, such as to build community and to bring healing, reconciliation, forgiveness and wholeness to people. Mission is to bring the life of God to others, and this can only be done if communities and people are poor and humble, letting the life of God flow through them.

Mission implies this double poverty, but also trust in the call and the power of God manifested though poverty, littleness and humility.

To the degree that people and communities are rich, self-satisfied, proud of their competence and power, and want to do things that they know they are capable of doing, they can not be used as instruments of the life of God. They give what they have, and that is their self-satisfaction. . . .

The quest for the eternal, all-beautiful, all-true and all-pure, and the quest to be close to the poor and most broken appear to be so contradictory. And yet, in the broken heart of Christ, these two quests are united. Jesus reveals to us that he loves his Father, and is intimately linked to him. At the same time he is himself in love with each person and in a particular way with the most broken, the most suffering and most rejected. To manifest this love, Jesus himself became broken

and rejected, a man of sorrows, of anguish and of tears. He became the Crucified One.

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From the east, from the west—only sixty-six of ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands upon thousands of voices around us in Gemeinschaft with Christ.

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The Most Holy Place, the seat of mercy, is the meeting place of the Lord's Gemein.

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Not one of the men and women I cite in this chapter “had it all.” Not one of them represents the “right group” as opposed to the wrong, or was a “saint” as opposed to ordinary sinners. That is not how the Kingdom of Heaven comes.

Every one of these men and women—like we—lived in partial and growing enlightenment. What they received from Christ, and were good enough to share, we may freely take and enjoy. (As beggars, we would be foolish not to.) But whatever they give us that Christ did not give them, we may simply leave beside the street, or in a garbage can.

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Poverty—a place at the bottom instead of the top—is the height of freedom.

People give us all sorts of things. Much of what they pitch us is worthless junk. But we may go through everything, even refuse heaps, and find incredible treasures, not worrying through whom they came or how.

Poverty—the recognition of our dependence on Christ—is cosmic peace. Relieved, once and for all, from the awful suspicion that God must speak and work primarily through us, we stop fearing others and trusting ourselves. Then we may look with wonder and great honesty at what is around us.

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Suddenly, in Gemeinschaft with Christ, in poverty, it becomes easy to know quality when we see it. Having tasted the king's food and worn his clothes, we identify what comes from him as easily as we identify good fruit from rotten, or friendly passers-by from the mean. It takes no degree to tell them apart. It takes experience.

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Perhaps the first scripture I knew by memory, for as often as I heard my father use it, was "*Prüfet alles, und das gute behaltet,*" (prove all things, hold fast what is good). We need this scripture. But how shall we tell what is good before we live in Gemeinschaft with Christ and others? It is not possible.

Could we have learned to read if we had disdained all help from others?

When the Word comes to us, when the daystar (the sun) begins to shine in our hearts, the scriptures open up before us. Not only the Holy Scriptures, but everything all men have written or said or done lies open before us in the light.

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"I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth," Yahshua said, "because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children."¹³

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¹³ Matthew 11:25

After the Friends meeting in San José we shook hands. We talked about Quakers, Moravians, and Mennonites. Then they set to work cleaning their library (they had come with dust rags and Windex) and we left to find a Chinese restaurant. Nearly everyone got chop suey with chicken.

Buses and cars roared past on the shabby street. Diesel smoke and snatches of music. Footsteps banged on a loose plate over a manhole. People talked and they had the news on. Fighting in the Balkans. Argentina playing Mexico today. The president.

Everything being written. Everything getting said. Missionaries coming and going. Books published. Churches planted. Meetings here and there. Marrying, giving in marriage. Important people. Problems solved and more created. . . .

But to wait on Christ we may sit in a clean room.

We may be silent.