

## MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS

Robert Ellsberg, Series Editor

### *Already published:*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (edited by Robert Coles)  
Simone Weil (edited by Eric O. Springsted)  
Henri Nouwen (edited by Robert A. Jonas)  
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (edited by Ursula King)  
Anthony de Mello (edited by William Dych, S.J.)  
Charles de Foucauld (edited by Robert Ellsberg)  
Oscar Romero (by Marie Dennis, Rennie Golden,  
and Scott Wright)  
Eberhard Arnold (edited by Johann Christoph Arnold)  
Thomas Merton (edited by Christine M. Bochen)  
Thich Nhat Hanh (edited by Robert Ellsberg)  
Rufus Jones (edited by Kerry Walters)  
Mother Teresa (edited by Jean Maalouf)  
Edith Stein (edited by John Sullivan, O.C.D.)  
John Main (edited by Laurence Freeman)  
Mohandas Gandhi (edited by John Dear)  
Mother Maria Skobtsova (introduction by Jim Forest)  
Evelyn Underhill (edited by Emilie Griffin)  
St. Thérèse of Lisieux (edited by Mary Frohlich)  
Flannery O'Connor (edited by Robert Ellsberg)  
Clarence Jordan (edited by Joyce Hollyday)  
G. K. Chesterton (edited by William Griffin)  
Alfred Delp, SJ (introduction by Thomas Merton)  
Bede Griffiths (edited by Thomas Matus)  
Karl Rahner (edited by Philip Endean)  
Sadhu Sundar Singh (edited by Charles E. Moore)  
Pedro Arrupe (edited by Kevin F. Burke, S.J.)  
Romano Guardini (edited by Robert A. Krieg)  
Albert Schweitzer (edited by James Brabazon)  
Caryll Houselander (edited by Wendy M. Wright)  
Brother Roger of Taizé (edited by Marcello Fidanio)  
Dorothee Soelle (edited by Dianne L. Oliver)  
Leo Tolstoy (edited by Charles E. Moore)

MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

HOWARD  
THURMAN

Essential Writings



*Selected with an Introduction by*

LUTHER E. SMITH, JR.

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

Founded in 1970, Orbis Books endeavors to publish works that enlighten the mind, nourish the spirit, and challenge the conscience. The publishing arm of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Orbis seeks to explore the global dimensions of the Christian faith and mission, to invite dialogue with diverse cultures and religious traditions, and to serve the cause of reconciliation and peace. The books published reflect the views of their authors and do not represent the official position of the Maryknoll Society. To learn more about Maryknoll and Orbis Books, please visit our website at [www.maryknoll.org](http://www.maryknoll.org).

---

Copyright © 2006 by Luther E. Smith, Jr.

Published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0308.

All rights reserved.

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to reprint selections from the following copyrighted material:

Beacon Press for excerpts from *Jesus and the Disinherited* © 1949 and *Meditations of the Heart* © 1953.

Friends United Press for excerpts from *The Centering Moment* © 1969, *The Creative Encounter* © 1954, *Deep Is the Hunger* © 1951, *Deep River* and *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* © 1975, *Disciplines of the Spirit* © 1963, *The Inward Journey* © 1971, *The Luminous Darkness* © 1989, *The Mood of Christmas* © 1985, *The Search for Common Ground* © 1986, *Temptations of Jesus* © 1978.

Harcourt Brace & Company for excerpts from *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* © 1979.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Queries regarding rights and permissions should be addressed to:  
Orbis Books, P.O. Box 308, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0308.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

---

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thurman, Howard, 1899–1981.

[Selections. 2006]

Howard Thurman : essential writings / selected with an Introduction by  
Luther E. Smith, Jr.

p. cm. – (Modern spiritual masters series)

ISBN-13: 978-1-57075-670-2 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-57075-670-8

1. Theology. 2. Baptists—Doctrines. I. Smith, Luther E. II. Title.

III. Series.

BX6447.T48 2006

230'.044—dc22

2006014547

## Chapter 1

# Religious Experience: Encountering God



*Howard Thurman believes religious experience is not only essential for living as a person of faith, but also for knowing life in its fullest possible significance. He defines religious experience as the “conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God.” This experience of God may be activated by an inner awareness that bursts forth in one’s consciousness, or the experience may occur because of one’s contemplation of nature, art, worship, or ideas. Relationships with other persons can also activate religious experience — especially relationships characterized by love.*

*Thurman is a mystic. He describes mysticism as a form of religious experience where the awareness of a “conscious and direct exposure” to God is more intense. Thurman does not consider mysticism as a superior religious experience, only different. In fact, most of his writing and speaking about religious experience do not specifically refer to mysticism. Still, his mystic consciousness informs all his insights.*

*Through religious experience, asserts Thurman, the individual comes to know God’s loving presence in a personal and private way. This knowledge provides the individual a sense of*

*ultimate security and confidence. Life takes on a new focus requiring a reassessment of the adequacy of one's commitment to God.*

*Spiritual disciplines are essential to religious experience. These disciplines "ready" the individual for religious experience, and they are the means for understanding and enacting the insights that may follow. Throughout his writing, Thurman mentions numerous spiritual practices. In *Disciplines of the Spirit*, however, he focuses on five disciplines: commitment, growth, suffering, prayer, and reconciliation. The identification of "suffering" as a discipline marks a distinction from the common tendency to treat suffering as something to be avoided. Thurman understands that there are times when suffering is the consequence of oppression, accidents, and disease. He advocates doing whatever one can, within ethical limits, to avoid such suffering. Still, suffering can also be a choice. Our commitment may clearly involve situations where suffering is either highly likely or assured. If, for fear of suffering, we fail to follow our commitment, then the fear of suffering has greater power over us than God. Under these circumstances, the choice of suffering can be a faithful response to the commitment that results from religious experience.*

*The new focus and commitment resulting from religious experience (and for Christians, from following the example of Jesus) inspire the desire to transform not only oneself, but also the world. Religious experience is thus crucial to both personal and social transformation.*

*Thurman is intensely interested in the religious experience of Jesus. He believes that we best understand the witness of Jesus as a response to his personal encounters with God. Jesus models the importance of religious experience as it relates to religious commitment and the practice of spiritual disciplines. Thurman thinks of Jesus as an intimate friend whose life reveals what it*

*means to surrender oneself to God. In following Jesus, Christians come to know spiritual authority and power for engaging life according to God's desires.*

*Thurman challenges the church to accept its responsibility in nurturing persons for religious experience and spiritual practice. He laments the tendency of the church to substitute creeds, doctrines, dogma, and ritual for religious experience. To be clear, Thurman believes these are resources for spiritual formation; however, they should not be considered replacements for the God-encounter that occurs in religious experience.*

*Religious experience and spiritual disciplines provide the foundation of every chapter of this book. By locating them in this first chapter, their significance and purpose are introduced. They are fundamental to defining, forming, and transforming both community and the self. Thurman believes that the Oneness of religious experience is the world's only hope for peace. Considering that religion has been the source of much of the world's conflict, this hope might appear misplaced. Yet the realization and power that come from encountering God eventually lead to the transformation of religion. This is the basis of Thurman's hope that the Oneness of religious experience will one day overcome the divisions among adherents of religions and within a violent world.*

## DEEP CALLS UNTO DEEP

Religious experience is interpreted to mean the conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God. Such an experience seems to the individual to be inclusive of all the meaning of his life — there is nothing that is not involved. There is present here what William James refers to as “acquaintance-knowledge” as contrasted with “knowledge about.” It is immediate experience

and yet experience that is purely immediate is not quite possible. The individual is never an isolated, independent unit. He brings to his religious experience certain structural and ideological equipment or tools. This equipment is apt to be very determinative in how he interprets the significance not only of his religious experience but also the significance of experience itself.

It is a rather curious paradox, and yet not altogether curious this idea, this fact rather, that the individual is very importantly an experiencer. All of the details of his experience, that is, the raw materials of his experience, are in some very crucial manner worked over by him, assimilated by him, and thus they become parts of what he defines as his own person, his own personality, or his own self. But the individual is never completely one with his experiences. He remains always observer and participant. This is very important to remember.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 20–21



There is present in religious experience an original and direct element which seems to be in, and of itself, intrinsic and supremely worthwhile. By this original and direct element, I do not mean some special religious organ or some unique religious element in the personality. But there is the aspect *extraordinary* in religious experience. But what?

It is in order to seek an answer to this question. The central fact in religious experience is the awareness of meeting God. The descriptive words used are varied: sometimes it is called an encounter; sometimes, a confrontation; and sometimes, a sense of Presence. What is insisted upon, however, without regard to the term used, is that in the experience defined as religious, the individual is seen as being exposed to direct knowledge of ultimate meaning, *ne plus ultra* being, in which all that the

individual is, becomes clear as immediate and often distinct revelation. He is face to face with something which is so much more, and so much more inclusive, than all of his awareness of himself that for him, *in the moment*, there are no questions. Without asking, somehow he knows.

The mind apprehends the whole — the experience is beyond or inclusive of the discursive. It is not other than the discursive, but somehow it is inclusive of the discursive. As Bennett puts it, “It is the knowledge of the subject of all predicates.” It is precisely because of this synoptic apprehension that the individual in the experience seems to come into possession of what he has known as being true all along. The thing that is new is the *realization*. And this is of profound importance.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 23–24

There is in all intuition the element of revelation which may be characterized as the leaping element. This aspect of intuition makes it throw light on known materials; and the thing that makes it an intuition is the fact that it establishes clearly and definitely what was known peripherally, vaguely, or merely dimly sensed. The intuition says that I bring you knowledge which has been there and in you all along. Such intuition serves a very important purpose in religious experience for it is the intuition that finally takes on a molding and tutoring character which gives content, in terms of concept, to the body of belief which becomes the individual’s religious equipment. It must be kept in mind that, how the person relates the intuition to the context of his life so that it becomes a handle by which he is able to connect himself with the living world of living events, is determined by the equipment which he brings to the experience.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 47



The goal of life is God! The source of life is God! That out of which life comes is that into which life goes. He out of whom life comes is He into whom life goes. God is the goal of man's life, the end of all his seeking, the meaning of all his striving. God is the guarantor of all his values, the ultimate meaning — the timeless frame of reference. That which sustains the flower of the field, the circling series of stars in the heavens, the structure of dependability in the world of nature everywhere, the stirring of the will of man to action, the dream of humanity, developed and free, for which myriad men, sometimes in solitariness in lonely places or in great throngs milling in crowded squares — all this and infinitely more in richness and variety and value is God. Men may be thrown from their courses — they may wander for a million years in desert and waste land, through sin and degradation, war and pestilence, hate and love — at last they must find their rest in Him. If there is that which at any time, anywhere in the universe, can ultimately withstand the divine urgency — then whatever it is that shows such strength is co-equal with God. Such a position to me is not only untenable, but is also a denial of the basic ethical monotheism that for me is the most satisfactory explanation of the meaning of life.

The source of life is God. The mystic applies this to human life when he says that there is in man an uncreated element; or in the Book of Job where it is written that his mark is in their foreheads. In the last analysis the mood of reverence that should characterize all men's dealings with each other finds its basis here. The demand to treat all human beings as ends in themselves, or the moral imperative that issues in respect for personality, finds its profound inspiration here. To deal with men on any other basis, to treat them as if there were not vibrant and vital in each one the very life of the very God, is the great blasphemy; it is the judgment that is leveled with such

relentless severity on modern man. “Thou hast made us for thyself and our souls are restless till they find their rest in thee,” says Augustine. Life is like a river.

Deep River, my home is over Jordan —  
Deep River, I want to cross over into camp ground.

— *Deep River*, 77–78



Here we are face to face with perhaps the most daring and revolutionary concept known to man: namely, that God is not only the creative mind and spirit at the core of the universe but that He — and mark you, I say He — is love. There are no completely satisfying ways by which this conclusion may be arrived at by mere or sheer rational reflective processes. This is the great disclosure: that there is at the heart of life a Heart. When such an insight is possessed by the human spirit and possesses the human spirit, a vast and awe-inspiring tranquility irradiates the life. This is the message of the spiritual [“Wade in the Water”]. Do not shrink from moving confidently out into choppy seas. Wade in the water, because God is troubling the water.

— *Deep River*, 95

*Thou Hast Searched Me and Known Me*

[Psalm 139:1]

In all places

Where I have dallied in joyous abandon,

Where I have responded to ancient desires and yielded  
to impulses old as life, blinded like things that move  
without sight;

Where chores have remained chores, unfulfilled by  
laziness of spirit and sluggishness of mind;

Where work has been stripped of joy by the ruthless  
     pruning of vagrant ambition;  
 Where the task has been betrayed by slovenly effort;  
 Where the response to human need has been halfhearted  
     and weak;  
 Where the surge of strength has spent itself in great  
     concentration and I have been left a shaking reed in  
     the wind;  
 Where hope has mounted until from its quivering height  
     I have seen the glory and wonder of the new dawn  
     of great awakening;  
 Where the quiet hush of utter surrender envelops me in  
     the great silence of intimate commitment;  
 Thou hast known me!

When I have lost my way, and thick fog has shrouded  
     from my view the familiar path and the lights of  
     home;  
 When with deliberate intent I have turned my back on  
     truth and peace;  
 When in the midst of the crowd I have sought refuge  
     among the strangers;  
 When things to do have peopled my days with mounting  
     anxiety and ever-deepening frustration;  
 When in loneliness I have sat in the thicket of despair  
     too weak to move, to lift my head;  
 Thou has searched for and found me!

I cannot escape Thy Scrutiny!  
 I would not escape Thy Love!

— *The Inward Journey*, 140–41



Not only is faith a way of knowing, a form of knowledge, but it is also one of life's great teachers. At no point is this fact more clearly demonstrated than in an individual's growing knowledge of God. It is obvious that, in the last analysis, proof of the existence of God is quite impossible. A simple reason for this is the fact that, if there is that to which God may be finally reduced, then He is not ultimate. But let us not be led astray by this apparent abstraction. Faith teaches a man that God is. The human spirit has two fundamental demands that must be met relative to God. First, He must be vast, limitless, transcendent, all-comprehensive, so that there is no thing that is outside the wide reaches of His apprehension. The stars in the universe, the great galaxies of spatial groupings moving in endless rhythmic patterns in the trackless skies, as well as the tiny blade of grass by the roadside, are all within His grasp. The second demand is that He be personal and intimate. A man must have a sense of being cared for, of not being alone and stranded in the universe. All of us want the assurance of not being deserted *by* life nor deserted *in* life. Faith teaches us that God is — that He is the fact of life from which all other things take their meaning and reality. When Jesus prayed, he was conscious that, in his prayer, he met Presence, and this consciousness was far more important and significant than the answering of his prayer. It is for this reason primarily that God was for Jesus the answer to all the issues and the problems of life. When I, with all my mind and heart, truly seek God and give myself in prayer, I, too, meet His Presence, and then I know for myself that Jesus was right.

— *Deep Is the Hunger*, 145–46

Religious experience in its profoundest dimension is the finding of man by God and the finding of God by man. This is the inner witness. The moral quality is mandatory because the individual must be genuine in his preparation and in his motivation and in his response. His faith must be active and dynamic. It

was pointed out earlier that the individual enters the experience and/or the preparation for it with the smell of life heavy upon him. He has in him all his errors and blindness, his raw conscience and his scar tissues, all his loves and hates. In fact, all that he is as he lives life is with him in this experience. It is in his religious experience that he sees himself from another point of view. In a very real sense he is stripped of everything and he stands with no possible protection from the countenance of the Other. The things of which he is stripped are not thrown away. They are merely laid aside and with infinite patience they are seen for what they are. It is here that the great decision is made as to what will be kept and what will be discarded. A man may take a whole lifetime to put away a particular garment forever. The new center is found, and it is often like giving birth to a new self. It is small wonder that so much is made in the Christian religion of the necessity of rebirths. There need not be only one single rebirth, but again and again a man may be reborn until at last there is nothing that remains between him and God.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 39–40



Fundamental to our thinking is the concept that God is the Creator of life and the Creator of man, and this in itself would tend to indicate that, therefore, God and man initially have that in common which the creature would have in common with the Creator. The place at which this contention seems to be relevant is at the point of the concern and the interest which the individual has for sharing in and creating values. It is quite conceivable that if there are purposes in the mind of the Creator and if I may enter into fellowship and communication with the Creator, then I would as a result of that fellowship and communication be exposed to the vision of His purposes. The degree to which I respond to that vision do I participate formally and consciously in those purposes. Thus my commitment becomes

one in which I put at the disposal of the larger and more creative purposes of the Creator my little life, my little thoughts, my little activities, my little devotions. In the living of my life I establish more and more levels of understanding of the Creator as I achieve in fact what I see in vision.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 44–45

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The place and significance of spiritual disciplines and exercises cannot be overemphasized. It is important, however, to understand what that significance is. There is no *necessitous* relationship between the disciplines and the awareness of God's presence. All disciplines of this character are meant to "ready" the mind, the emotions, the spirit. They are no guarantor of Presence.

This is the miracle, the heights and depths of wonder and awe. God reveals His Presence out of the mystery of Being. With all of my passionate endeavor, I cannot command that He obey. All of my prayers, my meditation, my *vast* and compelling urgency or need cannot order, woo or beg God into the revealing of His Presence. Even my need and my desperation cannot command Him. There is an overwhelming autonomy here; God does move in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. But He is so full of such wonderful and heartening surprises.

In the total religious experience we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit. It is in the waiting, brooding, lingering, tarrying timeless moments that the essence of the religious experience becomes most fruitful. It is here that I learn to listen, to swing wide the very doors of my being, to clean out the corners and the crevices of my life — so that when His Presence invades, I am free to enjoy His coming to Himself in me.

In fine, I cannot command; I work at preparing my mind, my spirit for the moment when God comes to Himself in me. When it happens, I experience His Presence. When this experience becomes an object of thought and reflection, it is then that my mind creates dogmas, creeds and doctrines. These are the creations of the mind and are therefore always *after* the fact of the religious experience. But they are always out of date. The religious experience is always current, always fresh. In it I hear His Voice in my own tongue and in accordance with the grain in my own wood. In that glorious and transcendent moment, it may easily seem to me that all there is, is God.

— *Temptations of Jesus*, 14–15

## Commitment

The meaning of commitment as a discipline of the spirit must take into account that mind and spirit cannot be separated from the body in any absolute sense. It has been wisely said that the time and the place of man's life on earth is the time and the place of his body, but the meaning of his life is as significant and eternal as he wills to make it. While he is on earth, his mind and spirit are domiciled in his body, bound up in a creature who is at once a child of nature and of God. Commitment means that it is possible for a man to yield the nerve center of his consent to a purpose or cause, a movement or an ideal, which may be more important to him than whether he lives or dies. The commitment is a self-conscious act of will by which he affirms his identification with what he is committed to. The character of his commitment is determined by that to which the center or core of his consent is given.

This does not mean, necessarily, that the quality and depth of a man's commitment are of the same order as what he is committed to. There is a dynamic inherent in commitment itself which seems to be independent of what the commitment

is focused on. This is an important distinction, always to be borne in mind. Here again we encounter the same basic notion discovered above: there seems to be a certain automatic element in commitment, once it is set in motion. There are a mode of procedure and a sense of priority — one might say, an etiquette and a morality — that belong automatically to this kind of experience, once it becomes operative. In other words, once the conditions are met, energy becomes available in accordance with what seems a well-established pattern of behavior. What is true for plants and animals other than man seems to be true for man. There are many complexities introduced as we observe the pattern at the level of mind, but they must not confuse the basic, elemental fact. When the conditions are met, the energy of life is made available. . . .

Serious problems arise when the same principle operates in the conscious activities of man. There is a sense, alas, in which it is true that the wicked do prosper. When a man who has an evil heart gives the nerve center of his consent to evil enterprise, he does receive energy and strength. The most casual observation confirms this in human experience. There is a vitality in the demonic enterprise when it becomes the fundamental commitment of a life. However, the Christian view insists that ultimately the evil enterprise will not be sustained by life, for the simple reason that it is *against* life. What is against life will be destroyed by life, for what is against life is against God. Nevertheless, there is a time interval when nothing is in evidence that can distinguish the quality or integrity of an evil commitment from a good one. This is at least one of the important insights in the Master's parable of the wheat and the tares. There is a period in their growth when they cannot be distinguished or separated from each other. Ultimately the wheat bears fruit proper to itself, and the tares are only tares. But meanwhile the issue is not clear, not clear at all. Again, the Master says that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the

just and unjust.” We seem to be in the presence of a broad and all-comprehending rhythm. There is a logic and an order in the universe in which all living things, at least, are deeply involved.

— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 17, 18



In Christianity there is ever the central, inescapable demand of surrender. The assumption is that this is well within the power of the individual. If the power is lacking, every effort must be put forth to find out what the hindrance is. No exception is permissible. “If the eye is a hindrance, pluck it out . . . if the arm is a hindrance, cut it off.” Whatever stands in the way of the complete and full surrender, we must search it out and remove it. If a bad relationship is a hindrance, one must clean it up. In other words, whatever roadblocks appear, the individual must remove them. The yielding of the very nerve center of one’s consent is a private, personal act in which a human being, as sovereign, says “Yes.” The ability to do this, to say “Yes,” is not the result of any special talent, gift, or endowment. It is not the product of any particular status due to birth, social definition, race, or national origin. It is not a power one can exercise only if given the right by one’s fellows. It is not contingent upon wealth or poverty, sickness or health, creed or absence of creed. No, the demand is direct and simple: Surrender your inner consent to God — this is your sovereign right — this is your birthright privilege. And a man can do it directly and in his own name. For this he needs no special sponsorship. He yields *his* heart to God and in so doing experiences for the first time a sense of coming home and of being at home.

— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 19–20

The dynamics inherent in the surrender become immediately available to the life of the surrendered person. His life is given back to him at another level. Literally he loses his life and finds

it. In the surrender to God in the religious experience there is no loss of being but rather an irradiation of the self that makes it alive with “Godness” and in various ways. There is awakened the desire to be Godlike. This is no vague pious wish, no moist-eyed sentimentality, but rather a robust affirmation of the whole spirit of the man. This is no casual interest in superficial goodness. It is goodness at its profoundest depth. It is this kind of goodness which must have been in the mind of Jesus when someone addressed him as Good Master and he said, “Why callest thou me good? there is none good but God.” To be good as God is good becomes the overwhelming desire. This means goodness not in contrast with evil, but goodness in terms of wholeness, for lack of a better term, of integration. Or again perhaps more crucially in terms of creative synthesis. There must be about God an “altogetherness” in which all conflict is resolved and all tensions merge into a single integration.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 75–76

I had no idea of the procedure for ordination as set forth by the [Baptist] churches of Virginia. I asked for permission to prepare and read a statement of faith. It was highly irregular, I was told, but my request was granted. Then I brashly announced that I did not want the laying on of hands during the prayer of ordination. This custom was altogether too old-fashioned, I argued, with all the arrogance of youth. At this point Cousin Arthur balked. “There will be the laying on of hands or there will be no ordination.”

The day came. Dr. Owen arrived before noon. We gathered in the sanctuary. After all the delegates had been duly registered, the presiding minister turned the meeting over to an officer of the council, who served as the “catechizer.” I read my statement of faith, which was preceded by an announcement that this was an unusual procedure and was granted as a special favor to the host minister. Then the questions began, running

the gamut of religious doctrine within the scope of Virginia Baptist orthodoxy. The hours dragged on. After more than four hours of questioning, we were all exhausted and irritable. Finally, the secretary of the council, a young pastor who was a student and not much older than myself, raised the question of evolution. The Scopes trial was being held at the time. He spoke at length before coming to his question. "What does this young man really think about the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures? What he read from that piece of paper about the word of God could be said about Bryant's *Thanatopsis*." But he had talked so long to make his point that before I could respond, a motion was made to dismiss me, that my case might be discussed and a vote taken. It was duly seconded, but on the "question" the eldest minister said, "I would like to ask our younger brother only one question: When did God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit meet for the first time?" When I replied to the catechizer, in weariness and frustration, "I don't know, because I wasn't there," everybody laughed. Looking straight into my eyes, he answered his own question. "It was at the baptism of our Lord. I pray that They may see fit to meet in your heart." His words ended the meeting.

The ceremony of ordination was held at eight o'clock in the evening, and the moment of transcendent glory was for me the laying on of hands, which I had so strongly resisted. During the performance of this ancient and beautiful ritual "the heavens opened and the spirit descended like a dove." Ever since, when it seems that I am deserted by the Voice that called me forth, I know that if I can find my way back to that moment, the clouds will lift and the path before me will once again be clear and beckoning.

— *With Head and Heart*, 57–58

The religious experience as I have known it seems to swing wide the door, not merely into Life but into lives. I am confident that my own call to the religious vocation cannot be

separated from the slowly emerging disclosure that my religious experience makes it possible for me to experience myself as a human being and thus keep a very real psychological distance between myself and the hostilities of my environment. Through the years it has driven me more and more to seek to make as a normal part of my relations with men the experiencing of them as human beings. When this happens love has essential materials with which to work. And contrary to the general religious teaching, men would not need to stretch themselves out of shape in order to love. On the contrary, a man comes into possession of himself more completely when he is *free* to love another.

— *The Luminous Darkness*, 111

## Growth

Growth means development in the life of an organism. It means change manifest in structure. In highly developed organisms such as man, growth means change in structure and quality of character. Generally it does not mean random development — an irresponsible or irresponsible change. Perhaps there is no such thing as random development. The term suggests lack of understanding of the process at work in an organism, a lack which causes the development to seem out of line or out of character. This is because inherent in the concept of growth is a certain ordered quality, an orderliness of plan. The lines along which the growth of any particular form of life takes place are fundamental to that form itself.

— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 38



If the response of the parents or others [to a child's commands for attention] continues to be available on demand, the conscious or unconscious intent being to keep the time interval at zero between wish and fulfillment, the baby begins to get a false

conditioning about the world and his place in it. For if he grows up expecting and regarding as his due that to wish is to have his wish fulfilled, then he is apt to become a permanent cripple. There are many adults who for various reasons have escaped this essential discipline of their spirit. True, in terms of physical and intellectual development they have continued to grow. Their bodies and minds have moved through all the intervening stages to maturity, but they have remained essentially babies in what they expect of life. They have a distorted conception of their own lives in particular and of life in general. . . .

The effort to shorten the interval is natural to growth; to know when waiting is essential to the process and to the life of the individual is to be disciplined in one's spirit. To learn how to wait is to discover one of the precious ingredients in the spiritual unfolding of life, the foundation for the human attribute of patience. This is not to imply that patience is always a virtue, always desirable. Sometimes it is merely an escape into inaction because of fear or cowardice or laziness. Sometimes it may be sheer confusion in the presence of a demand that overwhelms and engulfs. What seems to be patience may be a state of inertia, the result of unyielding weariness or exhaustion. As such it is sterile and lifeless. — *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 41, 42



Growth also means the experience of crisis. This is a form of tension. In the growing child tension has the same basic elements that are present in the dynamics of crisis wherever found. It is created by two forces making contradictory demands simultaneously. On the one hand there is the push toward the new, the unexplored, the unknown and untried. This is the essential pull of all adventure. It causes the child to “get into trouble” with his environment because he is always upsetting something that is fixed in its place. It makes him try to open all

closed doors, pull out bureau drawers, get the feel of fire, experiment with electric outlets — the list is as long as it is hazardous. The restlessness seems to be innate and is not at first geared to specific desire or intent. . . .

But this is not the whole story of the anatomy of crisis. There is another impulse at work, as authentic as that just noted. It is the inner urge to pull back, to withdraw, to stay put, to *hold*, as it were — an unadmitted, perhaps unconscious intent to conserve, consolidate, hold the line against change and all its sundry implications. The child knows this as part of his experience of growth. Often he shrinks from the new, the untried. It seems quite natural to be frightened of the strange or the unfamiliar. The tendency seems more pronounced during certain periods of childhood than in others. At such times, to become identified with the unfamiliar is to be threatened with isolation from the group. To get out of step in dress or language is to be exposed to marked penalties. . . .

Thus this principle of growth is involved even in the resolution of tension. The tension cannot stand indefinitely. It has to be resolved in one way or another. The resolution is in terms of holding back or letting go, of staying put or moving ahead. In fact, it is in terms of change, and this is true even if the decision appears to fall on the side of no movement or no change. For, once the crisis is made plain and the decision taken against change, a different basis for continuing has emerged. The situation is never as it was before the issue was faced or forced.

— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 48–51, 53



Growth always involves the risk of failure to fulfill what is implicit in a particular life, its potential. . . .

The possibility of error is essential to any understanding of the significance of mistakes. The error potential inherent in human life, geared as it is to the finitude of man's existence, is

at least one of the major marks of distinction between man and other animals or forms of life. As a creature, he is bound in his body by the tendency inherent in the form of life he represents. His body grows as other bodies grow. The life in him fulfills itself, or works toward that fulfillment, in what we have seen as a tendency to goal-seeking inherent in life even in its simplest forms. . . . Man is more than a creature, he has a mark of the image of God in him; he is a creator of worlds, a dreamer of dreams, and a fashioner of kingdoms. As such, he is involved in a context of relationships which he shares with his fellows, and what he does at any particular moment or in any given circumstance involves others as well as himself. Thus his responsibility for his actions, his choices, is in effect not confined to himself. This fact alone has much to do with the constant threat of error. Though a man make a private or personal choice, its bearing on the lives of others is ever present. . . .

Never to be forgotten is the fact that the real possibility of failure, deriving from the constant threat of error, is one of the real challenges of growth. To guard against this and be prepared to deal with it when it occurs is an authentic discipline of the spirit. To be victimized by error and at the same time keep on making choices with integrity is to grow in grace. And for the religious man, it is to grow not only in grace but also in the knowledge and experience of God.

— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 55, 57, 58

## Suffering

Suffering is always pain in some form. A thing that is not capable of feeling pain cannot suffer. A simple working definition is that suffering is physical pain or its equivalent, with reference to which the individual may be inspired to protect himself, so that despite its effects he may carry on the functioning of his life.

— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 66

In the first place, when a man is driven by suffering to make the most fundamental inquiries concerning the meaning of life, he has to assess and re-assess his total experience. It may be that he has never seriously thought about the meaning behind the energy of a simple act. He has never thought seriously about God. He has taken his life and all life for granted. Now under the assault of pain he is led to wonder about the mystery of life. Why do men suffer? he asks himself. He sorts out the answers available to him, some of which we have touched upon. He may conclude, perhaps, that suffering is given; it is a part of the life contract that every living thing signs at the entrance. Therefore it must belong in and to life. It is no invasion from the outside. It is no strange phenomenon wandering at random among the children of men. And if it belongs, then it has to be accepted as a part of one's acceptance of life. To reject it is to reject life. This is the first thing that he pins down in his assessment.

If suffering belongs, then does it go along for the ride, or must it carry its end of the stick? Does it have a function? What would life be like if there were no suffering, no pain? The startling discovery is made that if there were no suffering there would be no freedom. Men could make no mistakes, consciously or unconsciously. The race could make no mistakes. There would be no error. There would be no possibility of choice at any point, or in any sense whatsoever. It is irrelevant to suggest that there might be a more satisfactory way to guarantee this than to make human misery in some sense mandatory. Freedom therefore cannot be separated from suffering. This, then, may be one of the ways in which suffering pays for its ride....

Why do men suffer? They suffer as a part of the experience of freedom. They suffer as a part of the growth of life itself. They suffer as a part of life. This leaves many questions unanswered:

the pain of the innocent, the frustration of wasting illness of one kind or another. But at last we have a clue in the notion that without suffering there is no freedom for man, and that through it every man is faced with the necessity of experiencing in his being — not merely in his physical body — the meaning of death.

— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 80–81



What hostility may do is to serve as a guide through the wilderness of our suffering until we are brought to the door of the temple. When we face God with our hostility, a kind of ultimate suction takes place which empties us completely. This is achieved in our confession to Him about how we feel toward Him, toward life and perhaps toward ourselves about our suffering. Out of our struggle we may be given insight into the suffering itself; we may be given quiet assurance, or we may relax our intent into His Purpose, or we may turn it over to Him in quiet obedience. But this must be truly done.

I sat by a lady on the train one day who talked incessantly about nothing in particular. Suddenly she turned to me and asked, “Do you believe in prayer?” I replied very slowly, “Yes.” “So do I,” she said, quick as a flash. Continuing, she said, “Before I left home today, I took all of my troubles” — here she digressed for twenty minutes to fill in details — “made them into a neat bundle and handed them over to God; but before He could get the bundle unwrapped to take a look, I snatched them back again.” It is this mood that must be guarded against in our suffering in relation to religious experience. It is particularly relevant because hostility tends to keep up the illusion of self-importance and pride. There are many people who would feel cheated if suddenly they were deprived of the ego definition that their suffering gives them.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 52–53

## Prayer

In the first place prayer, in the sense in which I am using it, means the *method* by which the individual makes his way to the temple of quiet within his own spirit and the *activity* of his spirit within its walls. Prayer is not only the participation in communication with God in the encounter of religious experience, but it is also the “readying” of the spirit for such communication. It is the total process of quieting down and to that extent must not be separated from meditation. Perhaps, as important as prayer itself, is the “readying” of the spirit for the experience.

In such “readying” a quiet place is very important if not altogether mandatory. In the noise of our times such a place may be impossible to find. One of the great services that the Christian church can render to the community is to provide spells and spaces of quiet for the world-weary men and women whose needs are so desperate. . . .

When one has been thus prepared, a strange thing happens. It is very difficult to put into words. The initiative slips out of one’s hands and into the hands of God, the other Principal in the religious experience. The self moves toward God. Such movement seems to have the quality of innate and fundamental stirring. The self does not see itself as being violated, though it may be challenged, stimulated, inspired, conditioned, but all of this takes place in a frame of reference that is completely permissive. There is another movement which is at once merged with the movement of the self. God touches the spirit and the will and a wholly new character in terms of dimension enters the experience. In this sense prayer may be regarded as an open-end experience.

Fundamental to the total fact of prayer in the Christian religion is the persuasive affirmation that the God of religious experience is a seeking and a beseeching God. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, . . . how often would I have gathered thy children

together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not." The great parables of "The Lost Sheep," "The Lost Coin," and "The Prodigal Son" carry the same idea. The discovery of such a fact in one's experience in life is first met in the religious experience itself.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 34–35, 37–38



The experience of communion [with God through prayer] may elicit an expression of concern for someone whose need is great or for whom one has compelling love. Such a person may be ill, or in trouble, or in deep quandary before the exacting demands of a fateful decision. To bring him and his need clearly to mind, or into complete focus, and expose him tenderly to the scrutiny and love of God through our own thought is to pray for him. At such a moment questions as to the efficacy of intercessory prayer becomes merely academic. I share my concern with God and leave the rest to Him. Does such a sharing do any good? Does it make a difference? The conviction of the praying person is that it does some good, that it does make a difference. Can you prove it, he may be asked. In what does proof of such a thing consist? The question of the effectiveness of intercessory prayer does not belong in the experience of the man who prays for his friend—it is his care that is poured out when he is most conscious of being cared for himself. When the hunger for God becomes articulate in a man so that it is one with his initial experience of God, it is the most natural thing in the world to share whatever his concerns may be. A man prays for loved ones because he has to, not merely because his prayer may accomplish something beyond this.

There is no attempt here to deal with the problems and issues that center in a discussion of what is called intercessory prayer. With reference to these I permit myself one comment only. The man who shares his concern for others with God in prayer does

two things at the same time. He exposes the need of the other person to his total life and resources, making it possible for new insights of helpfulness and creativity to emerge in him. In other words he sees more clearly how to relate himself to the other person's need. In the second place, he may quicken the spirit of his friend to a sudden upsurging of the hunger for God, with the result that he is in the way of help from the vast creative energies of God. How this is done we may speculate but never explain. That it happens again and again in the religious experience of the race is a part of the data of the prayer experience itself. . . .

The communion may be an overflowing of thanksgiving. Here I do not mean an order of thanks for services rendered or for good received. Here is no perfunctory grace before meals, when a person chooses to mumble gratitude either out of habit, or superstition, or because of spiritual breeding of a high order. No, I do not mean this sort of thing, but rather the overflowing of the heart as an act of grace toward God. The overflow is not merely because of what has taken place in life or in the world or because of all the manifestations of benevolence that have covered a life. Something far more profound is at work. It is akin to adoration; it is the sheer joy in thanksgiving that God is God and the soul is privileged and blessed with the overwhelming consciousness of this. It is the kind of thanksgiving that sings itself to the Lord because He is God. This praiseful thanksgiving overshadows any bill of particulars, even though many particular things crowd into mind. We can get some notion of what is meant here when, under some circumstances, we encounter a person who, for what seems to be a swirling temporary moment, enjoys *us* — not what we say or what we are doing or what we represent, but who reaches into the core of our being and touches us purely. How such moments must rejoice the heart of God! I agree most heartily with Rufus Jones

when he says that prayer at its best is when the soul enjoys God and prays out of sheer love of Him.

— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 100–101, 102



We must find sources of strength and renewal for our own spirits, lest we perish. There is a wide spread recognition of the need for refreshment of the mind and the heart. It is very much in order to make certain concrete suggestions in this regard. First, we must learn to be quiet, to settle down in one spot for a spell. Sometime during each day, everything should stop and the art of being still must be practiced. For some temperaments, it will not be easy because the entire nervous system and body have been geared over the years to activity, to overt and tense functions. Nevertheless, the art of being still must be practiced until development and habit are sure. If possible, find a comfortable chair or quiet spot where one may engage in nothing. There is no reading of a book or a paper, no thinking of the next course of action, no rejecting of remote or immediate mistakes of the past, no talk. One is engaged in doing nothing at all except being still. At first one may get drowsy and actually go to sleep. The time will come, however, when one may be quiet for a spell without drowsiness, but with a quality of creative lassitude that makes for renewal of mind and body. Such periods may be snatched from the greedy demands of one's day's work; they may be islanded in a sea of other human beings; they may come only at the end of the day, or in the quiet hush of the early morning. We must, each one of us, find his own time and develop his own peculiar art of being quiet. We must lose our fear of rest. There are some of us who keep up our morale (morale has been defined as a belief in one's cause) by being always busy. We have made a fetish of fevered action. We build up our own sense of security by trying to provide a

relentless, advantageous contrast between ourselves and others by the fevered, intense activities in which we are engaged. Actually, such people are afraid of quiet. Again, most activities become a substitute for the hard-won core of purpose and direction. The time will come when all activities are depressing and heavy, and the dreaded question, “What’s the use?” will have to be faced and dealt with. The first step in the discovery of sources of strength and renewal is to develop the art of being still, physical and mental cessation from churning. This is not all, but it is the point at which we begin.

—*Deep Is the Hunger*, 175–76

### *Some Centering Moment*

We wait in the quietness for some centering moment that will redefine, reshape, and refocus our lives. It does seem to be a luxury to be able to give thought and time to the ups and downs of one’s private journey while the world around is so sick and weary and desperate. But, our Father, we cannot get through to the great anxieties that surround us until, somehow, a path is found through the little anxieties that beset us. Dost Thou understand what it is like to be caught between the agony of one’s own private needs and to be tempest-tossed by needs that overwhelm and stagger the mind and paralyze the heart? Dost Thou understand this, our Father?

For the long loneliness, the deep and searching joy and satisfaction, the boundless vision — all these things that give to Thee so strong a place in a world so weak — we thank Thee, Father. For whatever little grace Thou wilt give to Thy children even as they wait in confidence and stillness in Thy presence, we praise Thee. O love of God, love of God, where would we be without Thee? Where?

—*The Centering Moment*, 85

*We Don't Know How*

We find it very difficult, our Father, to bring to a point of focus all of the fragmentation and divisiveness of our lives. We ask Thee to draw upon Thy long experience with Thy children, and out of this special wisdom and understanding, to interpret the words which we say to Thee in our prayer. We are overwhelmed by our great inability somehow to manage the imperfections of life, the imperfections of our own private lives, the clear insight which suddenly becomes dim and often disappears at the moment when we are sure that we could act upon it; the good deed which we express and which, as it leaves us, wings on its way to fulfill itself in another's life, in another's need. And as we watch, we are horrified at the way in which something goes wrong and the good deed is not a good deed in the way in which it works, and we are thrown back upon ourselves. We don't know how to manage the imperfections of our lives, the imperfections of so many expressions of our lives.

We have brooded over nature. We have understood here and there some of its inner mandates, and we have been able to translate these mandates into expressions of machinery and objects, and we have learned how to operate these machines and to make these objects, created out of our insights, expressions of our intent. We have made these things into servants to obey our minds and our wills and then, suddenly, we are faced with radical and quick and devastating breakdown! Something goes wrong, we do not know what, and there is mindless violence and destruction. We don't know how to manage the imperfections of our lives.

Now we wait for the fateful moment when once again we ourselves as a nation will begin learning, with more finesse and accuracy, to kill, to destroy. And we feel, some of us, that the only way to survive is to do this, and some of us are sure that this is but to hasten the end of the age.

How to manage the imperfections of our minds and our spirits, our thoughts, even our intent? O God, we don't know how. We don't know how. We don't know how. Take all the outcry of our anguish, all the sin and brokenness of our faltering selves and hold them with such sureness that we learn from Thee.

— *The Centering Moment*, 103

### *Thou Dost Not Become Weary*

It is our faith and our confidence, our Father, that Thou dost not become weary, because always before Thee we present the same sorry spectacle. It is our trust that Thou dost not get tired of us but that always Thou dost remain constant, even as we do not; that Thou dost remain true even when we take refuge in falsehood and error; that Thou dost remain kind and gracious when our hearts are hard and callous; that Thy scrutiny and Thy judgment hold despite all of our whimpering, self-pity, and shame. It is so good to have this kind of assurance and to know, as we move into the days and the hours that are still left to us, that we are not alone but that we are comforted and straightened by Thy brooding presence.

We would ask forgiveness of our sins, but of so much that is sinful in us we have no awareness. We would seek to offer to Thee the salutation of our spirits and our minds were we able to tear ourselves away from preoccupation with our own concerns, our own anxieties, our own little lives. We would give to Thee the “nerve center” of our consent if for one swirling moment we could trust Thee to do with us what our lives can stand.

O God, our Father, take the chaos and confusion and disorder of our minds and spirits and hold them so completely in Thy grasp that the impure thing will become pure, the crooked thing will become straight, and the crass and hard thing will

be gentled by Thy spirit. Oh, that we may have the strength to see and the vision to comprehend what in us is needful for Thy peace.  
— *The Centering Moment*, 112

## Reconciliation

[*More selections regarding this discipline are presented in the section “Nonviolence and Reconciling Community,” p. 121 below.*]

The discipline of reconciliation for the religious man cannot be separated from the discipline of religious experience. In religious experience a man has a sense of being touched at his inmost center, at his very core, and this awareness sets in motion the process that makes for his integration, his wholeness. It is as if he saw into himself, beyond all his fragmentation, conflicts, and divisiveness, and recognized his true self. The experience of the prodigal son is underscored in the religious experience of the race — when he came to himself, he came to his father’s house and dwelling place. The experience of God reconciles all the warring parts that are ultimately involved in the life of every man as against whatever keeps alive the conflict, and its work is healing and ever redemptive. Therefore there is laid upon the individual the need to keep the way open so that he and his Father may have free and easy access to each other.

Such is the ethical imperative of religious experience. This is not to suggest that religion is the only basis of the ethical imperative, but to state clearly that such an imperative is central to the religious experience. “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23–24).  
— *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 121–22

## THE EXEMPLARY JESUS

When the individual's life comes under the influence of the God of his religious exposure, then the stage may be set for a soul-shaking conflict of loyalty. At last he must decide without regard to the bearing of the decision on his loyalty to the group. This decision calls for something much more coherent and intelligible than a mere feeling that this is what God demands of him. It is here that the concept of incarnation in the Christian faith takes on a practical significance. How does the individual know that his obedience is to God? Can he trust his interpretation of his finding, his residue of religious experience? The way is open now for some form of authority. The Christian finds the clue to his answer, yet even more than this, he finds the answers themselves, in the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus becomes for such a view the *for instance* of the mind of God in reach of the tools of the individual. He *may* say, "I do not know what God requires. I'm not sure I can depend upon what seems to me the definite or definitive will of God. I am a creature of error, but I can know Jesus through the gospel and I share in the claim which is made for him and that he is the word made flesh. He is in reach, and he can give me a tested series of formulae for the guidance of my own life because of the shared commitment which is ours. The study of his life thus becomes a necessity of my commitment."

Any personal behavior, then, that is out of harmony with his life and teaching becomes exposed to the swift judgment of what seems to me now to be his spirit. Slowly his mind becomes my mind, and then the amazing discovery that the mind that is more and more in me is the mind that was more and more in him. The mind that was in him becomes more and more clearly to me to be the mind that is God. All of this may be achieved without any necessity whatsoever of making a God out of Jesus.

— *The Creative Encounter*, 82–83



Few of the spirituals have to do with the nativity of Christ. This has given rise to many speculations. James Weldon Johnson was of the opinion that the fact that Christmas Day was a day of special license having no religious significance to slaves, is largely responsible. My own opinion somewhat concurs. It should be added that, in the teaching of the Bible stories concerning the birth of Jesus, very little appeal was made to the imagination of the slave because it was not felt wise to teach him the significance of this event to the poor and the captive. It was dangerous to let the slave understand that the life and teachings of Jesus meant freedom for the captive and release for those held in economic, social, and political bondage. Even now these implications are not lifted to the fore in much of the contemporary emphasis upon Jesus. It is of first-rate significance to me that Jesus was born of poor parentage; so poor indeed was he that his parents could not offer even a lamb for the sacrifice but had to use doves instead. Unlike the Apostle Paul, he was not a Roman citizen. If a Roman soldier kicked Jesus into a Palestinian ditch he could not appeal to Caesar; it was just another Jew in the ditch. What limitless release would have been available to the slave if the introduction to Jesus had been on the basis of his role as the hope of the disinherited and the captive. In the teaching of the Christian religion to the slave this aspect of the career of Jesus was carefully overlooked, and continues to be even now. Much is said about what the Christian attitude toward the poor should be; but I have yet to hear a sermon on the meaning of the religion of Jesus to the disinherited, to the poor.

— *Deep River*, 21–22

Jesus of Nazareth had what seems to me to have been a fundamental and searching — almost devastating — experience of God. This experience was so fontal and so fundamental to the very grounds of his being that he had to deal with the

implications of this experience whenever he raised any question about the meaning and function of his own life.

—*Temptations of Jesus*, 22

*Not by Bread Alone*

The spirit swept upon him  
Like some winged creature from above!  
Light was all around:  
    Every leaf shimmered and danced,  
    A swirling dervish in a timeless trance.  
The sky was lost in light.  
He saw and felt the light.

From all around, here, there, everywhere  
The Voice whispered in tones that sang:  
    “Thou art my son; this day I claim you as my  
    own . . . ”

Wrapped in the echo of the sound  
He took the way beyond the city gates,  
Beyond the crooked path  
Where the rocks began!  
He walked until wilderness, rocky ledge and quiet  
Were all around. He found a resting place to wait.  
When the burning cooled and his mind would ease,  
    Then he would know.

Time passed making no sound and there was none to  
    count the hour.

Into his mind one question came:  
    What is man’s life?  
    Is it for bread he strives  
    That dreams might last?  
There is a way to hold the gate  
’Gainst hunger as a common fate:

Make bread the all-absorbing aim,  
 And give to it a prior claim.  
 There would be space for inner things  
 For the heavy fruit of prophet's dream.  
 It seemed so clear what he must do.  
 Lost in the labyrinth of Fancy's ways,  
 He had not reckoned with the Voice:  
     "No, not by bread alone."  
 It leaped into his mind like a thing possessed!  
     "No, not by bread alone."  
 The hills picked up the words and gave them sound;  
 Tramped the rhythm on wind and cloud, in sky and air,  
 All around, everywhere:  
     "No, not by bread alone.  
     Man does not live by bread alone.  
 Out of the mouth of God  
 All good things come:  
 Truth and beauty; goodness, love—  
     No, not by bread alone."

— *The Inward Journey*, 54–55

### *Jesus Prays*

To Jesus, God breathed through all that is. The sparrow overcome by sudden death in its evening flight; the lily blossoming on the rocky hillside; the grass of the field and the garden path; the clouds light and burdenless or weighted down with unshed water; the madman in chains or wandering among the barren rocks in the wastelands; the little baby in his mother's arms; the strutting arrogance of the Roman Legion; the brazen queries of the craven tax collector; the children at play or the old men quibbling in the market place; the august Sanhedrin fighting for its life amidst the impudences of Empire; the futile whisper of

those who had forgotten Jerusalem; the fear-voiced utterance of the prophets who remembered — to Jesus, God breathed through all that is. To Jesus, God was Creator of life and the living substance; the Living Stream upon which all things moved; the Mind containing time, space, and all their multitudinous offsprings. And beyond all these God was Friend and Father.

The time most precious for him was at close of day. This was the time for the long breath, when all the fragments left by the commonplace, when all the little hurts and the big aches could be absorbed, and the mind could be freed of the immediate demand, when voices that had been quieted by the long day's work could once more be heard, when there could be the deep sharing of the innermost secrets and the laying bare of the heart and mind. Yes, the time most precious for him was at close of day.

But there were other times he treasured, "A great while before day," says the Book. The night had been long and wearisome because the day had been full of nibbling annoyances; the high resolve of some winged moment had frenzied, panicked, no longer sure, no longer free, and then had vanished as if it had never been. There was need, the utter urgency, for some fresh assurance, the healing touch of a healing wing. "A great while before day" he found his way to the quiet place in the hills. And prayed.

— *The Inward Journey*, 30

### *The Triumphant Entry*

Searching indeed must have been the thoughts moving through the mind of the Master as he jogged along on the back of the donkey on that fateful day which marks in the Christian calendar the Triumphant Entry. The experience must have been as strange and out of character for him as it was for the faithful animal on whose back he rode.

For more than two years, Jesus had been engaged in a public ministry. Once when there were those who wanted to make him a king, he had refused. "My kingdom is not of this world." He had walked the countryside with his band of disciples, preaching, teaching, healing, and spreading a quality of radiance that could come only from one whose overwhelming enthusiasm was for God and His Kingdom. He had kept many lonely trysts in the late watches of the night, trueing his spirit and his whole life by the will of his Father. So close had he worked with God that the line of demarcation between his will and God's Will would fade and reappear, fade and reappear. Step by resolute step, he had come to the great city. Deep within his spirit there may have been a sense of foreboding, or the heightened quality of exhilaration that comes from knowing that there is no road back.

He had learned much. So sensitive had grown his spirit and the living quality of his being that he seemed more and more to stand inside of life, looking out upon it as a man who gazes from a window in a room out into the yard and beyond to the distant hills. He could feel the sparrowness of the sparrow, the leprosy of the leper, the blindness of the blind, the crippleness of the cripple, and the frenzy of the mad. He had become joy, sorrow, hope, anguish, to the joyful, the sorrowful, the hopeful, the anguished. Could he feel his way into the mind and the mood of those who cast the palms and the flowers in his path? Was he in the cry of those who exclaimed their wild and unrestrained Hosannas? Did he mingle with the emotions that lay beneath the exultations ready to explode in the outburst of the mob screaming, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" I wonder what was at work in the mind of Jesus of Nazareth as he jogged along on the back of the faithful donkey.

Perhaps his mind was far away to the scenes of his childhood, feeling the sawdust between his toes, in his father's shop.

He may have been remembering the high holy days in the synagogue, with his whole body quickened by the echo of the ram's horn as it sounded. Or perhaps he was thinking of his mother, how deeply he loved her and how he wished that there had not been laid upon him the Great Necessity which sent him out on the open road to proclaim the Truth, leaving her side forever. It may be that he lived all over again that high moment on the Sabbath when he was handed the scroll and he unrolled it to the great passage from the prophet Isaiah, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, to open the eyes of the blind, to unstop the ears of the deaf, to announce the acceptable year of the Lord." I wonder what was moving through the mind of the Master as he jogged along on the back of the faithful donkey.

— *The Inward Journey*, 31–32

It was the celebration of the Passover, the common meal of surging remembrance. The Master and his twelve disciples were gathered around the common board. Many and varied were the thoughts that streamed in endless procession through their minds. During the last few days, a strange and ominous quality had entered into the warm intimacy of the fellowship. The smell of death was in the air. There were many things that had been left unsaid through all the previous days, but now they clamored for utterance. But there were no words made ready. As it turned out, this was the last real calm before the precipitous days ahead, ending in the lacerating moment of the crucifixion. The last common meal. In the light of the events that followed it, every single detail of the meal was highlighted with a rare and awful radiance. Every accent in retrospect told its own sure tale. There was something living once, which, if it could be recaptured, would bring again into the midst the spirit of him whose magic had led captive their spirits, and once more they would know the comfort of his presence winging near. The

experience is a part of the human story. Suppose you and a friend had dinner together one evening in your home. A few days after, the word came to you that the friend was dead. You would crawl inch by inch over all the events of your last meal together: The fact that you had inadvertently given to him the chipped cup. You did not discover it until, in the candlelight, the chipped spot was revealed as he lifted it to his lips to drink. Given the fact of his passing, you read back into all the common talk of the evening many things that were not present at the time, but now are clear. Gently you put away the chipped cup. It can no longer be the common thing it was before. Perhaps in certain rare moments, when you wish particularly to have the memory of your friend very living, very present, very real, the cup is used again. It is symbolic of a whole lifetime of knowledge and sharing, which you and your friend had known. The cup becomes the reminder that you have shared deeply the spirit of your friend, and that is yours forever. Death could not touch it — he could never die. And so it would be all the way to the end. The communion service, the celebration of the last supper, stripped bare of all that devotion has done in beautiful liturgy or somber dogma, means that, when spirit invades spirit, the eternal in one man mingles with the eternal in another, transcending time, space, and all the artificial barriers by which one man is marked off, separated from his fellows. To those who have learned the mind and the teaching, the courage and the wisdom of the simple Master of Galilee, the sharing together of the common meal in the holy place is to usher into their midst spirit of his spirit and mind of his mind. “Yes,” he says to all, whatever may be their faith, creed, doctrine or persuasion, “when in your fellowship you eat your common meal, remember me.”

— *Deep Is the Hunger*, 161–62



The dilemma in the Garden is the facing of the same central problem, the same central temptation that did not ever quite desert the Master. He must fulfill the Word in him. And the Word was this: All of the children of men are children of God. The Word was the living embodiment of a way of living together that would confirm, in the stuff of life, the deep searching insistent intent of God, his Father. The dream did not stop there. How could this be done?

There is a way by which this dream, this intent, can become not merely literal truth but literal fact. In Jesus, the Kingdom was literal Truth, and the step from literal Truth to literal Fact involved implementation. To implement it men must ready themselves with moods, attitudes, feeling tones, desires, all summarized by the word Love.

But men can't do this by themselves, the dream continues. Because the dream is a part of the very intent of God, the resources of God are available on behalf of the translation of the dream from literal Truth to literal Fact. Over and over again Jesus said, "O men, how little you trust Him."

As this dream began to work, in all of its manifestations, it created tensions and pressures in the midst of a society that had not made up its mind. It is important for me to remember as I reflect upon this (and this may not be right, but it seems to me to be right) that there wasn't anything personal in this. The people who felt themselves threatened by this insistence on the part of the Master did not regard it as something that was personal and private, something that was focused or aimed at them in particular, but Jesus symbolized that which challenged and threatened the established structure. And the structure fought back, not merely because it did not like Jesus. That was not the point. The structure fought back because the structure did not want to be upset. . . .

It is not merely that at his age, he [Jesus] didn't want to die. That's perfectly natural, isn't it? There is nothing unusual about that. But to die with such a sense of "my work not done." And if I can convince myself that no one else can do the work, then death is a terror. This is the subtlety of the spiritual paradox that gripped his soul: The deeper the sense of commitment, the deeper the sense of full-orbed destiny that rode through all the reaches of his mind; the deeper his concentration, the more crucial his life seemed to be for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. . . .

I think that here Jesus is dealing with the most difficult thing in religious commitment: To be able to give up the initiative over your own life; to yield at the core of one's self, the nerve center of one's consent to God; and to trust the act itself.

We do not know His mind. We cannot fathom the mystery of God. We cannot even understand the meaning of our own little lives, but the fierce hold that we have on our lives, again and again, is the most real thing that we have. To relax that and to trust God — not to run His world, not to people His Universe, not to hold things in some kind of all-encompassing grasp; no, but to trust God just with you, with me, to say, "It's all right; my times are in Thy Hands" — is the most difficult dimension of the spiritual life. It was the experience of the Master, I think after trying and doing it here and there a little, that when he finally made the supreme and transcendent discovery that when a man is sure of God in that way, he can stand anything that life can do to him, and even death becomes a little thing.

When I contemplate his life and see all the little anxieties and misgivings that I have, I am astounded, confounded by what he did. I search the depths of my own soul to see if I may find some kind of clue from him that will help me do the same thing, and be answered. It may not matter whether any prayer any time was ever answered. If I am not answered, then all the answered

prayers in the world are but confusing and confounding and distorting. — *Temptations of Jesus*, 64–65, 66–67, 67–68



“My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me!” According to the Gospel of Mark, these are the final words uttered by Jesus before his death. They reveal at once one of the most amazing utterances in the entire literature of religion. Here is one who was convinced that he had followed the will and the leadings of God through all the shifting scenes of his life at a most crucial moment in the development of his own people. He had experimented effectively and conclusively with love and understanding as a way of life; he had spent long hours in prayer and meditation; he had given himself with increasing intensity to a full-orbed understanding of the mind of God, whom he interpreted as Father. The logic of his life had led him to the fateful agony of the cross. He was there keeping his tryst with his Father — but where was his Father? The implication of the cry, which Jesus quotes from one of the Psalms, is that he was surer of God than God was of him. It means also that, in his moment of complete exhaustion, Jesus was making one of the great elemental discoveries about the nature of existence; namely, that often the point at which man becomes most keenly aware of the reality of God is on the lonely height, when he is stripped to the literal substance of himself, with nothing between his soul and an ultimate agony. At such a moment, God is seen as the only reality, and oneness with Him as the only fulfillment. The secondary meaning of this discovery is that the end of life and the meaning of life cannot be summarized in terms of happiness, joy, or even satisfaction. Again and again, we must discover that life may say “No” to our most cherished desires, our high hopes, our great yearning. And we must learn to live with life’s “No.” This is not only to discover the peace that passeth understanding, which may come when the pain of life is not relieved,

but also to know for oneself that God is closest to us when, in our agony and frustration, he seems to be farthest away.

— *Deep Is the Hunger*, 163–64

### *The Light of His Spirit*

In many ways beyond all calculation and reflection, our lives have been deeply touched and influenced by the character, the teaching, and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. He moves in and out upon the horizon of our days like some fleeting ghost. At times, when we are least aware and least prepared, some startling clear thrust of his mind is our portion — the normal tempo of our ways is turned back upon itself and we are reminded of what we are, and of what life is. Often the judgment of such moments is swift and silencing: sometimes his insight kindles a wistful longing in the heart, softened by the muted cadence of unfulfilled dreams and unrealized hopes. Sometimes his words stir to life long forgotten resolutions, call to mind an earlier time when our feet were set in a good path and our plan was for holy endeavor. Like a great wind they move, fanning into flame the burning spirit of the living God, and our leaden spirits are given wings that sweep beyond all vistas and beyond all horizons.

There is no way to balance the debt we owe to the spirit which he let loose in the world. It is upon this that we meditate now in the gathering quietness. Each of us, in his own way, finds the stairs leading to the Holy Place. We gather in our hands the fragments of our lives, searching eagerly for some creative synthesis, some wholeness, some all-encompassing unity, capable of stilling the tempests within us and quieting all the inner turbulence of our fears. We seek to walk in our own path which opens up before us, made clear by the light of his spirit and the radiance which it casts all around us. We join him in the almighty trust that God is our Father and we are His children living under the shadow of His Spirit.

Accept the offering of our lives, O God; we do not know quite what to do with them. We place them before Thee as they are, encumbered and fragmented, with no hints, no suggestions, no attempts to order the working of Thy Spirit upon us. Accept our lives, our Father — work them over. Correct them. Purify them. Hold them in Thy focus lest we perish and the spirit within us dies. Amen. —*The Inward Journey*, 126–27

## THE CHURCH'S CHALLENGE

It is in order now at last to raise the question: Is the witness of the church in our society the unfolding of such an idea as we see manifested in the religious experience and the life of Jesus? Whatever may be the delimiting character of the historical development of the church, the simple fact remains that at the present moment in our society, as an institution, the church is divisive and discriminating, even within its fellowship. It is divided into dozens of splinters. This would indicate that it is essentially sectarian in character. As an institution there is no such thing as the church. There has to be some kind of church. . . .

The concept of denominationalism seems to me to be in itself a violation of what I am delineating as the Jesus idea. The separate vision of a denomination *tends* to give to the individual who embraces it an ultimate, particularized status, even before God; as one of the older men in my boyhood church who admonished me because I was attending too many activities in the Methodist church: “Sometimes,” he said, “I think that I am a Baptist first and a Christian second.” In our moments of profoundest sobriety, there is clear recognition of the contradiction that is inherent in the concept of denominationalism as it is examined in the light of what for Christianity is the

Jesus idea. Inasmuch as the individual brings to his religious experience his context, it is perfectly natural and mandatory that he will enter his religious experience with his particular denominational frame of reference. That is the door through which he enters. In the encounter with God in the religious experience, however, the denominational frame of reference receives its true status, which is a *frame of reference*, without standing, as such, in the ultimate meaning of the experience itself. To make the frame of reference which is merely symbolic take on the life-giving character of the experience itself and thereby become binding as a principle of discrimination in the wider context of living and experiencing is to blaspheme against the experience itself. This, in my judgment, tends to undermine the integrity of the church as the promoter and inspirer of religious experience.

But when the church, even within the framework of the principle of discrimination inherent in denominationalism, further delimits itself in terms of class and race, it tends to become an instrument of violence to the religious experience. Here we come upon the shame of what is meant by the phrase of a certain minister in referring to the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning as "the great and sacred hour of segregation."

— *The Creative Encounter*, 139, 140–42

In an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Professor Toynbee has suggested the very real possibility that, if we are so foolish as to destroy our entire civilization and our own lives, then the creator of life could very easily make an ideal culture out of the ant. It is a most sobering thought. Again and again the human race has behaved as if it has some kind of monopoly on survival — and survival on its own terms, at that. The Church tends to foster this same notion. All the days of my life, I have heard men say that God is absolutely dependent upon the Church to spearhead His will and establish His true purposes

among men; if the Church fails, God is exhausted, and there is no other means at His disposal. This seems to be essentially unsound; even men are more resourceful than that. Once upon a time, John remarked that if men were silent, then even the rocks would cry aloud. Men may grow and develop into more whole and complete beings, spreading all of life with a glory that springs out of an increasing understanding of the meaning and the possibilities of life; or they may become more and more involved in their own devices, petty dreams, and unworthy ends until, at last, the very processes which they have set in motion blot them from the earth. If this should happen, or if it should not, it must be remembered always that God is infinitely more resourceful and creative than any expression of life, however profound and exceptional that expression of life may be.

— *Deep Is the Hunger*, 38–39



Years ago I had made a tentative discovery when I preached for the first time in the Methodist Church in my hometown and, to my amazement, discovered that I had the same kind of religious experience there that I had had in my own Baptist Church. Now, in India, there was a redefining of that experience, only in a much more complex and subtle way. I had to seek a means by which I could get to the essence of the religious experience of Hinduism as I sat or stood or walked in a Hindu temple where everything was foreign and new: the smells, the altars, the flowers, the chanting — all of it was completely outside my universe of discourse. I had to find my way to the place where I could stand side by side with a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Moslem, and know that the authenticity of his experience was identical with the essence and authenticity of my own. There began to emerge a growing concept in my mind, which only in recent years I have been able to state categorically, namely, that the things that are true in any religious experience are to

be found in that religious experience precisely because they are true; they are not true simply because they are found in that religious experience. It is not the context that determines validity. On any road, around any turning, a man may come upon the burning bush and hear a voice say, "Take off your shoes because the place where you are now standing is a holy place, even though you did not know it before." I think that is the heartbeat of religious authority. Little did I dream that the discovery that I began to make in the Methodist Church in Daytona, Florida, as a young Baptist preacher, would move in a straight line to the Temple of the Fish Eye in Madura.

This is not to say that all religions are one and the same, but it is to say that the essence of religious experience is unique, comprehensible, and not delimiting.

— *With Head and Heart*, 120–21

Is the religious experience as defined uniquely Christian or is it more universal in character? If in the religious experience a man identifies Jesus rather than God as the other principal in his religious experience, then the *exclusive* character of the religious experience becomes undeniable. In my judgment this raises more questions than it solves because it places the most fundamental moment in the life of the individual at the disposal of only those persons who bring to the moment a certain body of formal beliefs. Such a position establishes on theological and metaphysical grounds a *principle of separateness* in the human family that paves the way for the promulgation in the world of a Cult of Inequality that puts man against man and group against group. If such a cult is rooted in an experience so profound, as the religious experience is, then the metaphysical purpose that such an experience generates becomes a banner under which all manner of brutality and human misery may march.

But if in the religious experience the other principal is God, who is sensed as Creator of life and Father of the human spirit, then at such a moment the individual stands on his intrinsic worthfulness as a human being and affirms in the integrity of the moment his solidarity with all mankind.

The character then of a social institution whose inspiration is rooted in its commitment to that kind of religious experience becomes more and more defined in activities, functions, social attitudes, that defy all class, group, or ethnic affiliation. The startling words of Jesus come to life again. "For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Matthew 12:50).

— *The Creative Encounter*, 147–48

## REASON FOR HOPE

There is a strange irony in the usual salutation, "Merry Christmas," when most of the people on this planet are thrown back upon themselves for food which they do not possess, for resources that have long since been exhausted, and for vitality which has already run its course. Nevertheless, the inescapable fact remains that Christmas symbolizes hope even at a moment when hope seems utterly fantastic. The raw materials of the Christmas mood are a newborn baby, a family, friendly animals, and labor. An endless process of births is the perpetual answer of life to the fact of death. It says that life keeps coming on, keeps seeking to fulfill itself, keeps affirming the margin of hope in the presence of desolation, pestilence, and despair. It is not an accident that the birth rate seems always to increase during times of war, when the formal processes of man are engaged in the destruction of others. Welling up out of the depths of vast vitality, there is something at work that is more authentic than

the formal discursive design of the human mind. As long as this is true ultimately, despair about the human race is groundless.

—*Deep Is the Hunger*, 38

### *Madonna and Child*

During the season of Christmas in many art galleries, in countless homes and churches, and on myriad Christmas cards, there will be scenes picturing the Madonna and Child. There is a sense in which the Madonna and Child experience is not the exclusive possession of any faith or any race. This is not to gainsay, to underestimate, or to speak irreverently of the far-reaching significance of the Madonna in Christianity, particularly in Roman Catholicism. But it is to point out the fact that the Madonna and Child both in art and religion is a recognition of the universality of the experience of motherhood as an expression of the creative and redemptive principle of life. It affirms the constancy of the idea that life is dynamic and alive — that death as the final consummation of life is an illusion.

The limitless resources of life are at the disposal of the creative impulse that fulfills itself most intimately and profoundly in the experience of the birth of a child. Here the mother becomes one with the moving energy of existence — in the experience of birth there is neither time, nor space, nor individuality, nor private personal existence — she is absorbed in a vast creative moment upon which the continuity of the race is dependent. The experience itself knows no race, no culture, no language — it is the trysting place of woman and the Eternal.

The Madonna and Child in Christianity is profoundly rooted in this background of universality. Specifically, it dramatizes the birth of a Jewish baby, under unique circumstances, calling attention to a destiny in which the whole human race is involved. For many to whom he is the Savior of mankind, no claim as to his origin is too great or too lofty. Here is the culmination

of a vast expectancy and the fulfillment of a desperate need. Through the ages the message of him whose coming is celebrated at Christmastime says again and again through artists, through liturgy, through music, through the written and spoken word, through great devotion and heroic sacrifice, that the destiny of man on earth is a good and common destiny — that however dark the moment or the days may be, the redemptive impulse of God is ever present in human life.

But there is something more. The Madonna and Child conception suggests that the growing edge of human life, the hope of every generation, is in the birth of the child. The stirring of the child in the womb is the perennial sign of man's attack on bigotry, blindness, prejudice, greed, hate, and all the host of diseases that make of man's life a nightmare and a holocaust.

The Birth of the Child in China, Japan, the Philippines, Russia, India, America, and all over the world, is the breathless moment like the stillness of absolute motion, when something new, fresh, whole, may be ushered into the nations that will be the rallying point for the whole human race to move in solid phalanx into the city of God, into the Kingdom of Heaven on the earth. . . .

— *The Mood of Christmas*, 15–16

### *Christmas Is Waiting to Be Born*

Where refugees seek deliverance that never comes,  
And the heart consumes itself, if it would live,  
Where little children age before their time,  
And life wears down the edges of the mind,  
Where the old man sits with mind grown cold,  
While bones and sinew, blood and cell, go slowly down to  
death,  
Where fear companions each day's life,  
And Perfect Love seems long delayed.

CHRISTMAS IS WAITING TO BE BORN:  
In you, in me, in all mankind.

— *The Mood of Christmas*, 21

### *The Work of Christmas*

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
    To find the lost,  
    To heal the broken,  
    To feed the hungry,  
    To release the prisoner,  
    To rebuild the nations,  
    To bring peace among brothers,  
    To make music in the heart.

— *The Mood of Christmas*, 23

### *The Valley of Death*

Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death,  
    I will fear no evil.

“Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow.” My journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death may be hurried, swift. If so, this fact may reduce my fear, my anxiety. The time interval may be so short, and so much may happen, that fear does not have a chance at me. This lack of fear occurs with acute illness sometimes or with exposure to sudden danger. But if the illness is long drawn out and there is time for the gradual unfolding to the real meaning of my condition, then I seem to

be more completely at the disposal of all kinds of fears as well as of fear itself. Thus I *walk* through the Valley of the Shadow.

“The Valley of the Shadow of Death.” Is there some important difference between the valley of death and the Valley of the Shadow of Death? There is something which seems more deeply sinister about the Valley of the Shadow. There is the sense of impending danger, of threat. It is the war of nerves which life seems to be waging. The ax does not fall. I do not see the ax but always there is squarely across my path, the Shadow of the Ax. Such extended experiences shatter the nerves and tend to demoralize the life. Fear of this quality seems completely destructive.

“I will fear no evil.” When I *walk* through the *valley* of the *shadow* of death, I will fear no evil because God is with me. And His Presence makes the difference, because it cancels out the threatening element of the threat, the evil element of evil. Of course I may linger, or I may die; I may suffer acutely, or all my days may rest upon an undercurrent of muted agony. I shall not be overcome; God is with me. My awareness of God’s Presence may sound like magic, it may seem to some to be the merest childlike superstition, but it meets my need and is at once the source of my comfort and the heart of my peace.

Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death,  
I will fear no evil.

— *Meditations of the Heart*, 185–86



The religious experiences of the slave were rich and full because his avenues of emotional expression were definitely limited and circumscribed. His religious aspirations were expressed in many songs delineating varying aspects of his desires. The other-worldly hope looms large, and this of course is not strange; the other-worldly hope is always available when groups of people

find themselves completely frustrated in the present. When all hope for release in this world seems unrealistic and groundless, the heart turns to a way of escape beyond the present order. The options are very few for those who are thus circumstanced. Their belief in God leads quite definitely to a position that fixes their hope on deliverance beyond the grave. What a plaintive cry are these words:

Don't leave me, Lord  
Don't leave me behin'.

There is desolation, fear, loneliness, but hope, at once desperate and profound!  
— *Deep River*, 29–30

### *The Glad Surprise*

There is ever something compelling and exhilarating about the glad surprise. The emphasis is upon *glad*. There are surprises that are shocking, startling, frightening, and bewildering. But the glad surprise is something different from all of these. It carries with it the element of elation, of life, of something over and beyond the surprise itself. The experience itself comes at many levels: the simple joy that comes when one discovers that the balance in the bank is larger than the personal record indicated — and there is no error in accounting; the realization that one does not have his doorkey — the hour is late and everyone is asleep — but someone very thoughtfully left the latch off, “just in case”; the dreaded meeting in a conference to work out some problems of misunderstanding, and things are adjusted without the emotional lacerations anticipated; the report from the doctor's examination that all is well, when one was sure that the physical picture was very serious indeed. All of these surprises are glad!

There is a deeper meaning in the concept of the glad surprise. This meaning has to do with the very ground and foundation

of hope about the nature of life itself. The manifestation of this quality in the world about us can best be witnessed in the coming of spring. It is ever a new thing, a glad surprise, the stirring of life at the end of winter. One day there seems to be no sign of life and then almost overnight, swelling buds, delicate blooms, blades of grass, bugs, insects — an entire world of newness everywhere. It is the glad surprise at the end of winter. Often the same experience comes at the end of a long tunnel of tragedy and tribulation. It is as if a man stumbling in the darkness, having lost his way, finds that the spot at which he falls is the foot of a stairway that leads from darkness into light. Such is the glad surprise. This is what Easter means in the experience of the race. This is the resurrection! It is the announcement that life cannot ultimately be conquered by death, that there is no road that is at last swallowed up in an ultimate darkness, that there is strength added when the labors increase, that multiplied peace matches multiplied trials, that life is bottomed by the glad surprise. Take courage, therefore:

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,  
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,  
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

— *Meditations of the Heart*, 108–10