

*Meditations
for Older
People*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
A Prescription for Our Later Years	3
Examining Our Priorities	4
Respecting Ourselves	5
Cathedral Windows	6
Erasing Question Marks	7
My Boat and Thy Ocean	8
Today	9
The Message of the Clock	10
Enjoying Life's Minor Ecstasies	11
Choosing Our Spiritual Ancestors	12
Whales in Our Lives?	13
Our Holy Experiment	14
My Faith It Is An Oaken Staff	15
Humor and Laughter in Our Lives	16
Forgiveness	17
The Importance of Little Things	18
Compiling Our Own Anthologies	19
Gains As Well As Losses in Our Lifetime	20
Receiving As Well As Giving, Graciously	21
Exclamation Marks in Our Lives	22
Ministry by Mail and Telephone	23
Bridge-Builders	24
Guests in Our Lives	25
Jesus—Before Christianity	26
Triumphing Over Tragedies; Growing Through Grief	27
Life As a Jigsaw Puzzle	28
Communicating Confidence—Caring	29
Gaining a Planetary Perspective	30
Life's Mysteries	31
Facing Death	32

A PRESCRIPTION FOR OUR LATER YEARS

A few months ago a prominent American writer sent me a questionnaire he had devised and was sending to a large number of older people. It was a lengthy document, cleverly devised to elicit full and frank answers. With it he sent a request for a brief statement of my reflections "on being old."

Faced with a deadline for a forthcoming book, I responded that I didn't feel I could devote the time to his questionnaire that it deserved.

But I did say I would reply to his request for a brief statement about my reflections on old age. In fact, my reply would be extremely brief. In four words I would say, "Don't fossilize; keep growing." Or, in two words—"Keep growing."

That was not a flippant reply or an evasive answer. It was a summary, in capsule form, of my considered judgement on the best way to enjoy one's later years, contribute to the health and happiness of others, and to live longer—as one's psychological attitude certainly contributes to one's health and probably to one's longevity. It seems to me that the people who continue their hobbies and special interests, resume long-neglected parts of their lives when they retire, or develop new interests, are the ones who are happiest in their later years.

Such is my brief prescription for old age. What is yours?

* * *

Help us, oh God, to retain as long as possible our zest for living. Help us to keep alive our interest in others. Help us to see the sunshine as well as the dark clouds. Amen.

EXAMINING OUR PRIORITIES

One of the chief tasks of old age is—or should be—the frequent examination of our priorities.

On the surface it may seem that we have the same amount of time that we always did. Surely, people say, you still have 24 hours a day. But, in a sense, we don't. With our decreasing physical and psychic energy we need more time to accomplish tasks than we once did—whether it is reading the newspapers, writing letters, making our beds, or shopping. Also, there are new tasks—such as visiting the doctors or going to the hospital—sometimes with weeks of recuperation. And there are the special demands of the later years, such as clearing out or reducing our possessions.

Faced with such facts, as well as others, how would you order or re-order the following tasks? Which do you feel you are accomplishing best at the present time? On which do you feel you need to work more diligently?

1. My physical and mental health.
2. My financial affairs.
3. My spiritual health.
4. My attention to my family.
5. My concern for my friends—old and new.
6. My pursuit of old hobbies or interests and/or starting new ones.
7. My attention to movements and organizations in which I have been active—or new ones.
8. My concern about my religious fellowship.
9. My travel plans—for family visits and/or fun.
10. My reading.
11. My radio and television time.

* * *

Assist us, Thou Divine Counselor, as we try to determine the right ordering of our lives. Amen.

RESPECTING OURSELVES

How many sermons I have heard in my lifetime on the two Great Commandments—loving God and one's neighbors. Of course those messages are important as they constitute the heart of the teachings of Jesus.

But how seldom have I heard a sermon or read an article on the third part of that injunction—to love God and our neighbors *as ourselves*.

Yet counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and others are certain of the importance of respecting oneself. Over and over they tell us that we cannot really respect others unless we respect ourselves. That we cannot accept others unless we have accepted ourselves. That we cannot help release the potentialities in others unless we have begun to release the potentialities in ourselves.

Of course we need to be aware of our faults, our shortcomings, our limitations—and to work on them. But we need to be aware, also, of our strengths and to capitalize upon them. The Psalmist caught something of this when he said that we are created “a little lower than the angels” and Paul spoke of us as “children of God, and if children, then heirs of God and joint heirs of Christ” (Romans 8:17).

* * *

We are woefully aware of our weaknesses, oh God. Help us to be aware of our strengths and our potentialities. Amen.

CATHEDRAL WINDOWS

Shortly after the close of World War II, I was working in Paris and decided one Sunday to go to Rheims to see the famous cathedral. Many of the magnificent windows had been restored to their original places, but a few of them were still lying on the floor where passers-by could examine them closely. Seen in that way, the windows were not beautiful. They were merely tiny bits of glass, unevenly cut, and held together by molten lead, unevenly poured. At close range they seemed to have little pattern or design.

Yet there was a pattern to them and when the sun would shine through them again, they would reveal the artist's purpose as well as his expertise.

Perhaps the days of a year or the years of our lives are a little like those cathedral windows. Individually they are not especially significant. But when there is a pattern to all of them and the sun shines through, they reveal an overall design which is beautiful.

And perhaps the molten lead that binds them together is our meditation and prayer.

Similarly we may think of the members of a church or religious fellowship as tiny bits of glass which alone are not spectacular, but when fitted into a grand design mean much and are beautiful.

* * *

Help us, oh God, to recognize the importance of the grand design in our lives and in the life of the religious fellowships to which we belong. Help us to realize how our prayers and worship can provide the element that binds these disparate pieces together into a glorious pattern. Amen.

ERASING QUESTION MARKS

One of my friends once showed me her Bible and in the margins I noted an occasional question mark. Those, she told me, were pencilled alongside passages she did not understand yet. When she gained further insight into the meaning of such passages, she then erased the pencil marks.

I thought of her the other day when I gained a new understanding of a passage which had long baffled me. In the Authorized Version of the Bible, it says: "ye are God's husbandry. . . ." To me that meant next to nothing.

But in the Goodspeed translations of 1st Corinthians 3:9, it reads "You are God's farm . . ." That was understandable and I wondered what kind of farm I had. I wondered if I was letting God's sun shine on it and His rain nourish it. I wondered if I was letting it lie fallow enough. I wondered, too, what I could do to enrich my farm and to enable it to yield more.

Certainly one of the joys of old age is the ability to understand events, movements, and people better because of the wide range of life experiences we now bring to such situations. Now we are able to erase many more of the questions in our Bibles and in our lives than hitherto, although new questions also arise.

What are some of the question marks you have erased in recent years? What others can you now remove? What ones still confront you?

* * *

We are thankful for the fresh insights which often come in old age. Help us, oh God, to erase even more of the question marks in our life than we have already done. Amen.

MY BOAT AND THY OCEAN

Several years ago when I was in Brazil I saw the tiny vessels in which some of their fishermen went out to sea. Made from burned logs and equipped with primitive sails, I was astounded that anyone would venture into the Atlantic Ocean in such fragile boats, often for days at a time, and frequently facing dangerous winds and turbulent waves.

As I was thinking of their courage under such conditions, I suddenly thought of the short but poignant prayer of the Breton fishermen "Help me, oh God. My boat is so tiny and Thy ocean so wide."

In very different, and yet somewhat similar, ways we in our older years may feel like those frightened fishermen. Our "boats" seem so tiny and so fragile. Often our eyesight or our hearing is declining. We have experienced a broken hip or some other physical infirmity. Our spouses have died and we have lost many of our relatives and friends. Loneliness we know. We worry about the decline in our memories or in our energy.

And the world seems so frightening at times. Crime and terrorism abound. Corruption in government continues. Sexual permissiveness scares us. The nuclear holocaust seems near.

So, almost in desperation, we often pray, "Help us, oh God. Our boats are so tiny and Thy ocean seems so wide." All our fears are not removed but we receive renewed power. We do not mount up like eagles and fly. Nor do we run. But we can walk again.

TODAY

Another day is dawning and we recall what Arnold Bennett said—"You wake up in the morning and lo, your purse is magically filled with twenty-four hours—the most precious of possessions." So we take a few moments for meditation and prayer to consider how we will spend those precious hours. We become our own personal accountants and we ask God, the Great Accountant, to help us budget that time.

Then we recall the words of the Psalmist (68:98) that "This is the day the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" and we enter into our mental account some of the reasons for our rejoicing.

We think about the words in Hebrews (3:13)—"Encourage one another every day" and we consider carefully how we can best carry out that important injunction.

Furthermore, we remember the words of George Fox—"You have no time but the present. Therefore prize your time for your soul's sake" and we resolve not to concentrate on the past or the future, but on the present.

And the prayer of Rendel Harris comes to mind—"Lord, give us this day our daily discovery" and we pray for openness in the coming hours to fresh insights and new knowledge to make life more meaningful and creative.

One day is such a short time but we resolve to spend it wisely and well.

* * *

Glance over our shoulder, oh God, and counsel us as we plan the creative use of the 24 hours given to us to spend. Amen.

THE MESSAGE OF THE CLOCK

In my travels in this country and abroad I have seen and heard a good many famous clocks, such as Big Ben in London, England, and the remarkable tower clock in Berne, Switzerland, which produces a brief pageant every hour.

But the clock that has meant the most to me in my life is the Seth Thomas clock which stood on the mantel in our home when I was a boy. It was not an elaborate or expensive one but it was probably the most prized possession of our family.

Every quarter of an hour it struck or chimed and we were told just what it was saying.

On the first quarter of an hour it said:
Lord, for this hour

Then, on the second quarter of an hour it repeated that line and added the words

Be Thou our Guide.

For the third quarter of an hour, it repeated the first two lines and added:

So by Thy grace,

And for the fourth quarter-hour, it repeated the first three lines and added a fourth, to say:

Lord, for this hour
Be Thou our Guide.
So by Thy grace,
No foot may slide.

Today I prefer to substitute Love for grace, but otherwise that message still comes to me frequently and I pray:

Lord, for this hour
Be Thou my Guide.
So by Thy love,
No foot may slide.

Could this message of the clock be a meaningful prayer for you?

ENJOYING LIFE'S MINOR ECSTASIES

In her book on *The World in Tune*, Elizabeth Gray Vining refers to those few people who experience unusual ecstasies, pointing out that even those rare individuals have such experiences infrequently. Then she goes on to say:

With such grandeurs . . . I am not now concerned. I am thinking of what I have learned to call minor ecstasies—bits of star dust which are for all of us, however limited our opportunities. Everyone has these moments . . . something seen, something heard, something felt, flashes upon one with a bright freshness, and the heart—tired and sick or sad or merely indifferent—stirs and lifts in answer. . . . Exercising our faculty for minor ecstasies may actually increase the number of them we feel.

Today I have revelled in some such minor ecstasies:

- . . . the geese overhead in their giant V formations.
- . . . the bright red berries and the glossy-green leaves of the holly bushes.
- . . . the squirrels playing tag in the trees.
- . . . a talk with a friend I had not seen in years.
- . . . the recorded music of the Mormon Tabernacle choir.
- . . . observing the helpfulness of some “seasoned citizens” to others less fortunate.

What are some of the minor ecstasies you have experienced lately? Have you really relished them?

* * *

We are grateful, oh God, for the many minor ecstasies in our lives. Help us to relish them and to open ourselves to many more such experiences. Amen.

CHOOSING OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS

A favorite pastime of many older people is family genealogy. Often that hobby is carried on at the request of younger members of our families. So we turn over in our minds what we know. Then we search through the musty papers we have collected over the years, verifying our memories about people and events. If we are physically able, we may make trips to cemeteries, churches, and courthouses. In the process of assembling our family tree we often derive much personal pleasure.

Our physical ancestors we cannot choose, but our spiritual ancestors we can select, and we can gain much by becoming spiritual genealogists.

They may be persons we have known and who have served as models or guides in our lives.

They may be poets, dramatists, or novelists who have profoundly influenced us.

They may be commentators on the Bible or the Good Life, such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rufus Jones, William Temple, C. S. Lewis, or Carl Jung.

They may be saints of the Christian church, such as Francis, Augustine, or Francois de Sales; Catherine of Siena or Theresa of Avila.

Or they may be persons from the Bible: Peter or Paul; Jeremiah or Hosea. And certainly, Jesus.

Is this a hobby in which you are engaged or one which you could profitably undertake at this point in your life? It might be an interesting and worthwhile project.

* * *

We are grateful, oh God, for the many individuals who have meant so much to us in our long lives. We raise this prayer of thanksgiving today for our physical and our spiritual ancestors. Amen.

WHALES IN OUR LIVES?

It's a curious story, isn't it—that account in the Old Testament of Jonah and the whale? In her book on *The Bible and the Common Reader*, Mary Ellen Chase describes it as an ironic and humorous tale combatting the narrow, nationalistic tendencies of the Jews of that day.

Recently I have been wondering about the whales that swallow other people. Although he did not refer to them as whales, Toyohiko Kagawa mentioned the three great temptations of life as sex (in one's early years), money (in one's middle years), and power (in one's later years).

And I have wondered about the whales which follow people in their old age, ready to swallow them. Could they be:

1. Boredom?
2. Self-pity?
3. Cynicism?
4. Anger and rebellion at one's lot in life?
5. Money, beyond a reasonable concern?
6. Prestige?
7. Power?
8. Sex—longing for the vitality of earlier years?
9. Fear?

Are there other “whales” specializing in older people? What would you add to this list?

I think I know which whales pursue me. Which ones follow you?

* * *

*Help us, oh God, to be aware of the whales which follow us.
Help us to swim well enough and fast enough to escape being
devoured by them in our old age. Amen.*

OUR HOLY EXPERIMENT

Probably the most adventurous attempt to live out the prayer that “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” came in the colony of Pennsylvania. Oppressed minorities were encouraged to move there. Religious freedom was guaranteed to all. Whether they owned property or not, all men could vote. The death penalty was reduced to only two crimes. And the colonists lived at peace with their Indian neighbors.

It was a glorious experiment which deserves far more attention than it gets in the history books.

As Penn Day nears in my state of Pennsylvania, I have been wondering if our lives aren’t holy experiments—or could be.

Isn’t that what Paul meant when he said “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.” (Romans 12:1)

Acting upon the assumption that our lives are holy experiments could be a thrilling, enriching experience for us and for those around us. It would not mean that we became austere, sanctimonious individuals. It would mean that we became joyful, accepting, caring, outgoing individuals.

What would happen to us if we carried out such an experiment for a day—a week—or a month—until it became our pattern for life. Isn’t it worth a try?

* * *

We are grateful, oh God, for the gift of life. We are glad for the opportunities to testify to Thy love and Thy munificence. Help us, we pray, to make of our lives a holy experiment. Amen.

MY FAITH IT IS AN OAKEN STAFF

All of us who are older remember when we could run rapidly or take giant strides as we walked. What exhilaration, what joy that gave us!

Few of us can run or walk rapidly any more. In our community there are some people who must resort now to electric carts. But they are often adept in driving them. There are others who use walkers to get from place to place. But they frequently use those aids adroitly. There are even more who use canes. In fact, we sometimes divide our community, half-jokingly, into the Canes and the Ables.

Frequently as I see one of my friends with a cane, I think of what a help that small piece of wood or metal is. How it gives them the added help they need. How it adds assuredness to their maneuverings. How it steadies them at crucial moments.

Then I often think of faith in the same way and I even hum the words of the hymn—"My faith it is an oaken staff, o let me on it lean."

How many discouraging moments there are in our lives when we need to lean upon our faith. How many treacherous places. How many gloomy times. How many tense situations. So, over and over, we can sing "My faith it is an oaken staff" and add "O let me on it lean."

* * *

We give thanks, oh God, that our faith is an oaken staff. Help us to lean unashamedly on it in the many times when it is needed to give us added assurance, increased strength. Amen.

HUMOR AND LAUGHTER IN OUR LIVES

How startled I was recently while reading the magnificent writings of Rabindranath Tagore to come across the statement, "And God laughed."

What a new idea that was to me! How arresting! How important! Suddenly I realized for the first time that my God has always been a somber and serious one, even though loving, merciful, and forgiving.

Since then I have thought many times about that statement and have found a few choice comments on the role of humor and laughter in our lives.

It was Samuel Coleridge who said that "No mind is thoroughly well organized that is deficient in a sense of humor."

Dorothea Blum has commented that "Laughter heals. In fact, I consider laughter the lubricant that makes life possible. You can't drive a car with lubricant alone, but don't try driving without it."

And Norman Cousins, whose life was saved at one point in large part because of humor, has reflected that "Laughter is a form of internal jogging. It moves your internal organs around. It enhances respiration. It is an igniter of great expectations."

So I have resolved to add humor and laughter to my characterizations of God—and to enjoy more humor and laughter in my life. Have you done so, too?

* * *

We are so grateful, oh Divine One, that thou art so loving, so merciful, so forgiving. And that thou dost laugh! Amen.

FORGIVENESS

Recently I was invited for lunch to a retirement home by an elderly man. I did not know my host very well but we had served together on an important committee and he had upbraided me publicly on one occasion in a harsh, humiliating, and uncalled-for manner, in my opinion.

That lunch went well but at no time was there any mention of that unpleasant incident earlier in our lives.

Baffled by that situation, I talked with a mutual acquaintance about the meaning of our get-together. He replied that I was being asked for forgiveness. He was certain of that fact because my host had entertained others in the same manner. Yes, it was a strange way to make amends but that was as far as my host could go, he said.

Soon after that lunch, this elderly man died and I felt certain he had been glancing back over his life and trying to right the wrongs he had committed.

That incident was a strange but important one for me and I began thinking about the wrongs I should right and the individuals whose forgiveness I should seek.

Are there persons whom you should seek to forgive at this point in your life? Who are they and how can you best approach them?

* * *

Help us, Divine Counsellor, to consider any persons whose forgiveness we should seek and help us to find the best ways in which to do so. Amen.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LITTLE THINGS

Undoubtedly you have devoted yourself at various points in your life to some cause or movement—peace, education, civil rights, prison reform, or some other attempt to improve the lot of people on our planet.

But that time may now be a thing of the past. You still have time and ideas but your physical energy and financial resources may be severely limited.

Two quotations may speak to your condition as you lament your inability to do all that you once could do. One is the statement of William James who said:

I am done with great things and big successes. And I am for those tiny, invisible, molecular moral forces which work from individual to individual, creeping in through the cran-
nies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of the water, but which, if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of men's pride.

The second comment came from Pierre Ceresole of Switzerland, the founder of the international work camp movement, the forerunner of the Peace Corps. He wrote, "I will be satisfied to furnish just a little mud for the Great Construction."

Perhaps one of the lessons we need to learn in our later years is the importance of little things. What "little things" lie at hand for you at this point in your life?

* * *

We pray for Thy Divine Guidance, oh God, in adjusting to the changes brought about by the passage of time. Help us to be satisfied with "little things" at this juncture in our lives. Amen.

COMPILING OUR OWN ANTHOLOGIES

There are many anthologies of devotional quotations on the market which can be inspiring to each of us. There are also lists of Bible passages, often arranged by topics. And there are books and booklets of famous prayers which can speak to our condition from time to time.

We can use such readily available materials—and we undoubtedly should. But we need not rely solely on them. We can—and possibly should—compile our own collections of favorite quotations. Thus each of us can become an editor of his or her anthology. Assembling such a compilation can be an extremely useful experience and we turn to it for spiritual sustenance in a wide variety of situations.

Some of us will want to assemble such quotations on cards, by topics, in the way that cooks often collect recipes. Others will want to compile their favorite devotional quotations in tiny notebooks which are available at a moment's notice.

Many of these quotations will be lodged somewhere in the recesses of our minds. Others can be assembled from the scraps of paper on which we have recorded them over the years. Still others can be added from our current reading.

But no matter how we proceed with this task, it should be a helpful undertaking now and in the future.

* * *

We are grateful, oh God, for the wealth of inspiration available to us in almost any situation. Help us to profit from them now and in the future. Amen.

GAINS AS WELL AS LOSSES IN OUR LIFETIME

How easy it is to become discouraged, depressed, or even disillusioned about the state of the U.S.A. and the rest of the world.

So often the radio and television bombard us with the gloomy news of terrorism, civil wars, and hunger, and the newspapers publish lavish headlines of stories of crime, corruption, and prejudice.

To offset the gloom that is likely to arise from such news from the mass media, it may be well for us to think from time to time about the good news—about the gains as well as the losses in our lifetime. For example:

- ... the enormous change in the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in recent decades.
- ... the vast improvement in health in the U.S.A., with the elimination of many diseases, the wide use of serums and vaccines, and the extension of the lives of so many people.
- ... the tremendous advances of several minorities, especially Blacks and Jews.
- ... the huge gains by women in recent times and their advancement into positions of prominence.
- ... the almost unbelievable extension of educational opportunities, especially at the community college and university level.

These are just a few of the many gains made in the U.S.A. in the last few decades. What else would you add?

* * *

We are thankful, oh God, for the many gains in our lifetime and for the many people who have struggled to bring them about. Help us to pause frequently to consider the gains as well as the losses in our lifetime. Amen.

RECEIVING AS WELL AS GIVING, GRACIOUSLY

During the Hitler regime in Germany, I spent a year (1940-1941) in Berlin, as director of the Quaker International Center, primarily assisting Jewish people to leave that hate-drenched nation.

For more than an hour one morning I sat and listened to a mother pour out her grief about her daughter's plight as a Jewess under the notorious Nuremburg laws. I was really of no help to her unless it was by serving as a patient and caring listener, a human wailing wall.

Yet she was extremely grateful and offered a generous sum of money for the work of the Center. Adhering to the agreement of our governing committee not to receive such gifts, I refused to accept her contribution.

But I learned a little later from a secretary that she had found the collection box in the Meeting Room nearby and had dropped her money into it.

Feeling I had been tricked by her, I told a colleague about that situation. That fellow-worker suggested I read the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet and head with oil and it dawned on me why he had permitted her to do so. He had learned a lesson I had not learned—that it is sometimes more blessed to receive than to give.

That is a difficult lesson for older people to learn. All our lives we have been giving generously and graciously. Now it is extremely difficult to learn to receive graciously. But it is an important lesson to learn in our later years.

* * *

Help us, Thou Great Giver, to learn to receive as well as to give. Amen.

EXCLAMATION MARKS IN OUR LIVES

In our lives, as in writing, we use a variety of punctuation marks—sometimes consciously; often unconsciously.

We are baffled by some person, bewildered by some situation, bothered by some economic, social, political, or religious issue—and we use question marks.

We complete an assignment or chore, finish a job, or end a stage in our lives—and we use periods.

We stop what we are doing and rest for a while—and possibly re-create in the process—and we use a dash to represent that interval.

But do we use exclamation points enough in our lives? Hopefully we have not become so jaded in our later years that we do not cease to be filled with awe and wonder, thanksgiving and praise at such events as

- ... the kindness of a family member or friend.
- ... the courage of an acquaintance or someone we have read about.
- ... the coming of the seasons with their special garbs.
- ... the graceful steps of the dancer or the ice-skater over the television set.
- ... the rendition of The Messiah or the singing of the Negro National Anthem—Lift Every Voice and Sing.
- ... the poetry or prose of some of the world's great writers or the reproduction of some of the paintings of the world's greatest artists.

When did you last use an exclamation mark and what was it for? It is possible that all of us need to use this punctuation more?

* * *

We are grateful, oh God, that thy Light and Love are in evidence in so many places, people, and events. Help us to raise more often our prayers of thanksgiving and praise. Amen.

MINISTRY BY MAIL AND TELEPHONE

In Romans (12:6) and in 1st Corinthians (12:4-11) Paul speaks of the many gifts or ministries open to Christians. But Paul seems to have overlooked the question of special ministries for those of us who are older.

Surely one of the frustrations of older people is our inability to take part in many of the activities in which we engaged when we were younger, including various forms of social service and social action. Is that true in your case?

But there are some ministries which are smaller and less taxing in time and energy in which we can engage. Two of them are the ministries by mail and by phone.

There are certainly many people who can profit from brief messages from us—words of praise, encouragement, appreciation, sympathy and understanding.

Undoubtedly there are members of our families, friends, acquaintances, authors of books we are reading, legislators, and newspaper editors and writers to whom we should write or phone.

And such messages should be brief, often just a line or a few words, long enough to state our message but short enough not to impose on their time.

Isn't this a ministry in which you could participate and be helpful to others?

* * *

Open our minds and hearts, oh God, to those for whom we might have an appropriate and brief message—and help us to act immediately on our resolve in these special types of ministry. Amen.

BRIDGE-BUILDERS

As I have criss-crossed the United States and travelled extensively in many parts of the world I have seen a great many bridges.

Several of them have been huge and awe-inspiring—spanning mighty rivers and bridging giant bays. Often they have been monuments to the genius of their designers and to the craftsmanship of their builders.

And there have been smaller bridges—hundreds of them, thousands of them—built across smaller rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds.

Some have been quickly constructed bridges, too, made by placing a log or plank across a narrow stream or other body of water.

As I have thought about bridges, I have realized that we are all bridge-builders. Perhaps as older people we even have a unique role in this regard—using our accumulated wisdom and our comparative impartiality as:

... bridge-builders in our families.

... bridge-builders in our friendship circle.

... bridge-builders in our neighborhoods and communities.

... bridge-builders in the clubs and committees of which we are still members.

... bridge-builders in the religious fellowships to which we belong.

And I have wondered on which bridges I should be working now—and what materials I should be using.

Are there small bridges on which you should be working? In what groups? With what materials?

* * *

Help us, oh thou Great Bridge-Builder, to ascertain what bridges we should be building and what materials we should be using. Amen.

GUESTS IN OUR LIVES

Returning home from the wedding of her son, Elizabeth Watson and her family were the victims of an automobile accident in which their oldest daughter was killed. It was a crushing blow and it took Elizabeth Watson a long time to recover from that numbing experience.

At every point in her recovery she was helped immeasurably by the poetry or prose of some writer—Emily Dickinson, Rainer Maria Rilke, Katherine Mansfield, Rabindranath Tagore, and Walt Whitman. Each spoke to her condition and helped with her healing.

Fortunately she has shared that experience with others in her short book—*Guests of My Life*.

What a wonderful thought that is—that we can have “guests” in our apartment or room, singly or in groups, and for a short time or for longer stays, through the medium of their writings.

Perhaps our guests will be poets—Blake, Browning, Gibran, Tagore, or Whitman.

Perhaps they will be novelists—Douglas, Goudge, Greene, Newman, or West.

Perhaps they will be philosophers—Buber, Chardin, James, or Whitehead.

Perhaps they will be psychologists—Erikson, Fromm, Jung, or May.

Perhaps they will be commentators on the Bible or famous preachers—Fosdick, E. Stanley Jones, Marshall, or Thurman.

What insights into life and what joy they can bring.

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We are grateful for those who have shared with us their reflections on lives worth living. Help us, oh God, to learn just a little more from them in our later years. Amen.

JESUS—BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

For many years I passed the Dutch Reformed Church on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, New York almost daily and I often reflected on its history, going back to colonial times. Yet I was often repulsed by the hideous yellow plaster which had long ago been daubed over what must have been a beautiful fieldstone building.

Then, years later, that congregation decided to restore their church to its original state. And it became again a beautiful fieldstone structure.

Often I have thought we have done that with the figure of Jesus. That thought was supported not long ago by the reading of a book by Albert Nolan entitled *Jesus Before Christianity*.

Perhaps some readers would like to try to rediscover more about the real Jesus. Among the ways you might do so would be:

- ... to read the Gospel accounts in editions which print the supposed words of Jesus in red ink.
- ... to peruse Sholem Asch's *The Nazarene*, filled with authentic background on the times in which Jesus lived.
- ... to study Harry Emerson Fosdick's *The Man from Nazareth: As His Contemporaries Saw Him*.
- ... to ponder the picture of Jesus in novel form as portrayed by Toyohiko Kagawa in his *Behold the Man*.
- ... to reflect on the sketch Kahlil Gibran has drawn in his *Jesus: The Son of Man: His Words and His Deeds as Told and Recorded by Those Who Knew Him*.

* * *

We long to learn more about Jesus—the real Jesus, before his portrait was retouched by well-meaning but often misled painters. Help us, oh God, to meet the Historic Jesus and the Ever-Present Christ. Amen.

TRIUMPHING OVER TRAGEDIES: GROWING THROUGH GRIEF

How many tragedies we all experience in our lives!

The son of a friend is born blind and the daughter of another is born mentally retarded. The elderly mother of a relative burns to death in their home and a promising nephew is killed in an automobile accident. One colleague dies of shock treatment in a mental hospital and another dies shortly after he has finally conquered his alcoholism.

Those are some of the tragedies I have experienced in my life—and every reader can compile a similar list.

It is not easy to accept such tragedies but it does little good to fight them. Instead, we need to realize, as far as possible, that they are among the many mysteries of life, utterly inexplicable. And we need to draw upon all our spiritual resources to live through such experiences, realizing, also, that time helps to heal.

Fortunately we can draw, also, on the example of those persons who have triumphed over the tragedies in their lives and have often grown through grief.

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Help us, oh God, to face our own tragedies and the tragedies of those we know and love as realistically and calmly as possible. Help us to accept and act upon them as wisely as we can. Help us to dig deep to the sources of our spiritual strength to help tide us through such troubled times. In the name of Him whose tragic death brought eventual triumph. Amen.

LIFE AS A JIGSAW PUZZLE

One of the popular pastimes in our retirement community is the assembling of jigsaw puzzles. In one corner of our Main Lounge there is a table on which there is always a puzzle. Around it are the regulars—and sometimes a few occasional participants.

Some work at their task by observing the color of the hundreds of tiny pieces. Others by the shapes. A few keep in mind the completed picture which is carried on the cover of the box in which those many irregular pieces are stored. Usually the regulars sit as they carry on their work. But sometimes they stand in order to gain a different perspective.

As I look at those puzzles or observe the workers, I sometimes wonder if life isn't a little like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Sometimes the pieces fit together easily. Often we are baffled by how they should be placed. Occasionally we need to stand aside to get a better perspective on our work. Patience is a virtue in either case.

At times we fit the pieces of our lives together by drawing upon our life experiences. Sometimes we use our intuition—or rely on luck.

But there are two big differences between these two processes. In our lives there is no picture of the completed work, unless it is in our hearts and minds. And our life's jigsaw puzzle is not completed until our death.

Have you experienced the joy recently of fitting together some of the apparently disjoined little pieces of your life? If so, what a joy it must have been!

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Help us, oh God, to develop a complete picture of our lives and to fit those apparently disjoined pieces into a more perfect pattern. Amen.

COMMUNICATING CONFIDENCE—CARING

One of the arresting facts about the ministry of Jesus was that it was carried on largely on a one-to-one basis. At times He touched large groups, but ordinarily He touched individuals. There was the man possessed of demons and the one with paralysis, the woman with her mite and the one with a hemorrhage, the rich young ruler and the tax collector.

To them he communicated confidence, trying to turn ordinary individuals into extraordinary ones. He told them to take up their mats and walk. He placed crowns over their heads and urged them to grow spiritually until they could reach them.

Baron von Huegel summed up the essence of Christianity in these few words: "Caring is the Christian thing. Caring is what matters most."

To a small degree we, too, can carry on that same ministry no matter how old we are, where we live, or the extent of our circle of relatives, friends, acquaintances—and passers-by. And we can extend that circle by mail and by telephone.

It might be amazing to try to list all the people with whom we come in contact in a week or a month even though our mobility may be limited. And it would certainly be helpful then to figure out how we can show each of those persons that we care for them. With whom should you start today?

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We marvel at the way in which Jesus released the hidden power in the people around Him. Help us to do the same in our small but significant way. Amen.

GAINING A PLANETARY PERSPECTIVE

How different the world is now from what it was when we were growing up. In our lifetime two new superpowers have emerged, mass communications have made our world one, and international organizations have been formed—both governmental and non-governmental. Furthermore almost all problems are now global in nature—terrorism, the plunder of our planet environmentally, the inequitable distribution of wealth, and the armaments race—including the most lethal weapon of all times—the Bomb.

How difficult it is to cope with such changes. Yet it can be done. Among other things we can:

- ... inform ourselves by listening to news broadcasts, reading such newspapers as the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times*, and if physically able, attending meetings where world problems are discussed.
- ... support and read the materials of a few organizations interested in world affairs.
- ... become experts on some small segment of international relations.
- ... communicate with legislators concerning important measures affecting the world.
- ... help inform others on topics with which we are familiar.

Alone we will do little to improve the world; in conjunction with others we can make a small contribution to the betterment of life on our planet.

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Help us, oh God, to forsake our porthole view of the world and to gain a planetary perspective. Amen.

LIFE'S MYSTERIES

How many mysteries there are in life in which we are involved directly or indirectly!

On the personal level there are separations, divorces, suicides, early deaths, mental limitations, and physical disabilities—to mention only a few. Sometimes we may even wonder why we are alive—and suffering so.

Over the years we may have found explanations for some of life's mysteries. We may still fathom others. But we should have learned, or learn now, that life is not always fair; that all mysteries are not solved. As Paul said in 1st Corinthians 13:2 "... we see through a glass, darkly. . . ."

Nevertheless, we can—and should—try to unravel some of life's perplexities.

Reading the works of psychologists may help. Even the works of novelists may help us to understand some of life's baffling situations.

Far more important is the help received when we face seemingly insurmountable situations frankly, talking them over with close friends and counsellors instead of internalizing our resentments and our anger.

Perhaps we need, also, to rethink our picture of God, realizing that he is not a giant puppeteer manipulating human beings, but that He (or She) has entrusted human beings with the earth—and that they often make huge mistakes.

Perhaps we need to forgive ourselves as well as others, realizing that we did the best we could in difficult situations—and that is all that can be expected of us.

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We are glad for the mysteries which we have been able to clear up. We seek Thy strength in accepting and living with the mysteries which are still unsolved. Amen.

FACING DEATH

No matter how many acts or scenes there are in our lives, there is always that final scene—death.

To some it comes quickly and painlessly. To others it comes slowly—and often with pain and suffering. To a few it comes violently. In our lives we have probably witnessed it in all those variations. And we pray, ever so fervently, that we may die quickly and painlessly.

There are many ways of facing death. We can be terrorized by it and thereby increase our panic and bring harm to those who love us. We can put our heads in the sand and temporarily dismiss it, only postponing the need to face it. Or we can face it, read about it, discuss it with knowledgeable people and those we love, externalizing our fears and frustrations, our guilty feelings, and our unfinished business. And we can enjoy the moments that are left for us if we are still in our right minds. We may even provide for the termination of our lives legally if that is our wish.

Meanwhile we can draw upon the spiritual resources we have learned about in our lives and gain strength for whatever comes in that final period of our lives. And for some, the belief in a life after death proves comforting and strengthening.

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Sooner or later death will come. We know that intellectually. Help us to realize that truth emotionally and spiritually, drawing upon Thy strength in that critical time. Amen.