

A BOOK OF UNCOMMON PRAYER



**A history begins with friends—
those next door who knew the routine,
the boys who found an arrowhead,
stories spilled, and smoothed in telling**

**to friends, who always seem to have seen
or heard, or once to have thought to have said—
always agreeing to have known—the same thing,
but somehow forget how the story ends.**

**If any of our history is read,
let it be told you always kept from telling,
even for the pretext “between friends,”
whatever things I should or shouldn’t have said.**

From The Profit of Doom, 1990

3

THREE WISHES

Although I have many letters and other documents for sources, they will never be enough for me to complete this little book. Even a summary comes short, but like any good fairytale, our life can be expressed in the three wishes granted to us—that I would not die in battle; that Susie would marry me, and that she would be cured of cancer. All three were granted. Ah! But like all fairytales, the story does not end when we get what we wished for. It turns out that the story was never about wishes at all. The wishes were like the burning rinses in hydrogen fluoride that etch the invisible wall of our perception with the patterns our appetites, habits, and compassion have created from this world. So, we see ourselves, what we made of the world, And, in the spaces, what we could have made.

Now I write our history.

Now I draw lines.

I shuffle cards.

I seek clues.

I embrace

Facts.

June 29, 2008

A BOOK OF UNCOMMON PRAYER

Remembering Susie

May 1, 1945-May 13, 2008

Uncommon Prayer

Uncommon prayer is sustained attention and creative engagement, personal or collaborative, that leads a cognitive procession from fate to will, ignorance to understanding, grasping to acceptance, waste to salvage, fear to hope, opportunism to compassion, exclusion to inclusion, and partial work to soul work.

Prayer about Susie would have to be uncommon, because she was an uncommon person—uncommonly kind, modest, sensitive, and able to enjoy the moment.

Prayer begins with wandering, fasting of mind, and zeroing of the instruments of perception, in the same way that the Space Infrared Telescope supercools its detectors to capture the slightest emanations.

Then one waits for messages.

Of course, when you wander, you often get lost.

LIFT OFF

May 17, 2008

Exhale.

Set meters to aught.

Let sorrows depart.

Exhale.

Let go.

Instruments, zero.

Forget what you know.

Let go.

Pierce eyes.

Fly with your heart.

Let sorrows depart.

Pierce eyes.

Home Project

Death turns out to be an easy project. You need no kit or special tools. Waiting is the main requirement. Mostly you do not move. You breathe easily until you don't. No special diet is needed because no food is needed. That's because you shut down. The stomach wrinkles up like a walnut and hunger disappears. A wonderful weakness takes over. There is no need to lift your heavy arms and legs. Your feet are so far away that you don't even think about them. You begin to wonder where you are. The angels of death come and go, reminding no one in particular that nothing is really needed to die naturally. They don't stay too long. They prefer endings and beginnings. The middle is left to you. You turn out to be a body of work. All around you, caretakers and mourners ask each other how they're doing. All you have to do is to die on time. Actually, there is a kit.

Various cocktails have been set aside in the fridge. This is in case you don't shut down in time, because once everyone is sure they don't feel too bad, it's your cue to be on your way. Not being ready on time will mean you need a send-off, like a squirt of Roxenol under the lower lip.

Now, understand, with you not moving or speaking, the difference between your discomfort and the uselessness of your loved-ones is nominal. If the waiting goes on too long, someone has to do something. It's not so much that there is no kit as that everyone prefers to ignore it, unless necessary. As with any home project, we like it when no special equipment is required. Keep it natural, like Thoreau going walking so that he wouldn't later discover that he had never lived. He was sure that the preservation of the world was in wilderness. Was he surprised. Trotting off into nature to avoid discovering you have never lived is a whooping wild ride into the dark leafy hollows of death. In both cases you fail to be preserved, except in an embalmer's *confiture*.

You are expected to shut down, but you can take your time about it, as Auden said of Yeats, until even the suburbs are deserted. But you are expected to shut down, because opportunities are at hand. Your death, apparently an ending, is the opening of possibilities. A rush of prospectors wait to start behind your finish-line, beginning with all those who rushed you about on gurneys and left you in various rooms for penetrations to make you limpid as the shallow plastic-bottomed pool you once saw installed beneath a water lily garden, its short-lived, golden fish glittering like your briefly luminescent

arteries and nodules, that have been slyly perfused for a kind of network newscast of the prospects available. Like Sooners racing for a stake, here come the insurers, swathed in disclaimers, specialists, aides, technicians, night watchmen, parking attendants, snack bar waitresses, their families and lawyers fanning out like remoras behind all of them. Last of all, I come. Even I, who love you, cannot help but to profit from you.

As nephrons feel their capsules close like the pressed clover leaves you carried in the wallet in your purse; as venules and arterioles, clasping each other like fingers of two hands, feel the pulsing tendril of blood being withdrawn; and even as the subcellular stock exchange of your membranes feels itself going all to sales—and none will buy—here am I, breathing your sweet breath, sharing your warmth, remembering you all wrong.

Well, it *is* called *re-membering*. No one promised more than a rough likeness at best. So we all come away from you with something. You are a body of works, perhaps even a school or period.

You sink into a deep sleep, asking for nothing, endorphins falling on you in a soothing, warm rain through the dogwoods, redbuds and rhododendrons you loved. You walk in some new place. I stagger around in the empty lobbies of bus stations. Delays and cancellations drove other passengers away. Even the locals were cancelled. Only the drunken sleeper with the stained crotch and greasy hair shares this place with me. No lines leave from this station any more.

No, it's only me. I am the drunken sleeper.

Like other objects left in the moraine as you withdraw and melt into the earth, I adhere to the detritus—your aunt's tea towels, your grandmother's *Lemoges* gravy boat, the tiny figures in the crèche you stood up shakily between cotton balls under twenty Christmas trees, a flute I cannot play, books with small notes in the careful print you preferred to cursive. Someone can use these things: the drawerful of white blouses with high necks, the wispy-haired doll in dimity, and all of the time I'll have when I no longer feed you, clothe you, and cherish you. Someone wants your long blue robe, the painting of the *Schloss* in Heidelberg, where we threw snowballs, and all of the space I will have when someone removes your dresses, shoes, and borrowed bed that rises, lifting you like an offering to the blue sky. Someone sees possibilities in these things.

As in any home project, the instructions do not cover the local situation, as when I assembled a lamp and speakers in the corner. Lacking head-room for the lamp, I pulled it apart, only then discovering the wires soldered at both ends making a great necklace of black tubes and bonnets with light bulbs peeking out. Lacking a socket in the only place to install a speaker, I extended the speaker wires and afterwards was compelled to imagine Mendelssohn's violin sweeping free of the skips and pops left from my meddling with the connection. Lacking instructions beyond the general purpose pamphlets left by the angels of death on one of their visits, I wait for you.

No lotus was provided in the kit, no enlightened one, skilled in shifting the weight of our life so that I will not be tipped over by it. How shall I carry it away for you if I can't pick it up? The local case always defies general purposes. We live as outliers. We live in the margins.

The weight of that living is *not* a ponderous mass of routine and normal existence extracted from the great body of human experiences, like a gooey ball of dough that is flattened to be sped off on sheets to the ovens, cooked into representative facts, and sliced with precision. That kind of weight is the weight of significance. But we who are outliers, inhabitants of the margins, individuals: we do not signify.

We burn with intensity, unfold, imagine ourselves into being and take the shapes of our aspirations. Our weight is the tug of structure held together by its inner geometry and the pulsing squeeze of endlessly iterated connections of fibers, tubules, and streams of fluids and electric currents. Even now, the work of your body is structure, structure extending into relationships, adhesions, possibilities and hopes. How can I lift it? Another class of prospectors will come soon enough. They scrape off the general features suited to their scraping tools. They write death notices, send messages worldwide, not about the shape of your lips forming a word dear to me, but about gender, birth-date, marital status, prior existing conditions and consequent revisions of life expectancies given this crisp, new bristle of information. The rest of our life is left behind, imponderable and untabulated.

I never finished a project that really looked the way it did in the picture, even when I myself made the picture, as when I traced the Audobon painting of the fish hawk pulling a trout from a stream. In raised copper, both bird and fish are too muscular, the

feathers and stippled scales both resembling sausages taped to a wall. Usually, I lost patience at some step of the operation. You can only stipple so long before feeling urgently called to get on with something else. It was the same when laying tile. All those little spacer-crosses were too much to bear. Waiting, even with nothing to do, turns out to be easier than enduring the delays entailed with the placement of countless spacers or the never-ending taps on the bevel to make the stipple points in copper all alike, or with the tiny, twitching brushstrokes in a painting needed to turn green blobs into leafy undergrowth, or with all the other kinds of painfully approximate endeavors in which the handiwork speeds along behind the growth of fingernails. Impatience wells up like reflux. So much delay leads to revolts.

The project never looks like the picture: the tiling hardened into a wavy surface, the small shed sprouted in front of the dark green undergrowth so there would be less painting to do, and now the project that we never finished, each of us hurrying along at the end—you with your breaths and me trying to catch them. Our project turns into something nothing like you.

(5/12-14/08)

Remembering Susie
May 1, 1945 – May 13, 2008
May to May

What I lose
By breathing out
Has little left.

What you lost
Last breathing out
Leaves nothing left.

What we lost,
Held taut, breathed out,
Gives out, lies cleft.

May 25, 2008

OUR LIFE BEGAN WITH LETTERS
December 29, 1965-November 22, 1971

This book of remembrance and of grief is a collage of photos, poems, comments and love letters. Like my thoughts, it does not follow a straight line. Susie and I met at a church Christmas party on December 29, 1965. I wrote to her the next day. Our correspondence continued until the summer of 1969, when we were married. After that, the notes come from letters we wrote to our parents, journals, and her notes, jotted on scraps of paper that she pushed into the backs of dresser drawers. We were only able to meet briefly between 1966 and 1969 because of obligations at school and work. We didn't talk frequently on the phone. It was through letters—and a few, luminous hours together—that we slowly became sure of each other.

After her death in 2008, I copied some of the letters, including our correspondence with parents and friends, during 1966-1969. I also assembled a timeline, and copied some of our correspondence and other writings from 1950-2008. This book, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer*, made from my compilation, was written for general readers. The original materials and my compilation, go to our sons, Bill and Rob, to keep or discard. For them, I also prepared another record, *Timeline*. Other works—the long and short of us in short stories, short takes, poems, music, and novellas—about the strange community of “Fairall” are gathered into the *Marginal Notes* project. But that's another story. As of this writing, it's still a work in progress.

September 25, 2009

Thursday morning
December 30, 1965
Alexandria, VA

Dear Susan,

After talking with you for a short time last night, I feel that I would like to become better acquainted with you. Perhaps through the exchange of letters we may share ourselves with one another more adequately than is possible in twenty minutes of unpremeditated chatter.

Yes, it is curious that spirituals arose from a slave people. The slave who transformed his misery and discontent into the strong beauty and moving simplicity of a spiritual suggests to me something about human nature. Fear pain and inconvenience though we do, as is evidenced by the physical psychological devices we use to alleviate them, it is most often through experiencing pain and inconvenience that we receive the gift of opportunity to step outside ourselves as new people. As new people we see that the world is transformed and cannot help but describe it as such, by our art—a negro's spiritual—and by our total reaction to life. I'm thinking of the old lady who cleans the dormitory I live in at school. Since meeting her at the beginning of this past semester, I have not known two weeks to pass which did not carry some disaster for her or for her family. Her son in jail, her husband drunk, her sister in a flood, her daughter with a nervous breakdown. She is not cheerful; she is calm, expectant, one whose speech builds up and does not tear down. She doesn't want misfortune, but she does accept it, expectant of the gift of a transforming grasp of life. Her faith feeds our faith.

After that last paragraph I feel very earnest, however I am less earnest than impulsive and, like most people, tend to be wholeheartedly for any given venture over a very short period of time.

Will you be beginning your exams on Monday? If so, do well. By the way, what is the name of your school? I'm afraid I only remember a couple of persons' names from last night. (There is a saying that good writing begins *in medias res*—'by jumping into the middle of things, where it most concerns you.' This letter is exemplary, if not of good writing, then at least of jumping into the middle of things—whether they concern me or not.) I am interested in learning more from you, about your work at school and away, your opinions and your hopes.

Sincerely yours,
Dick Rose

School (after Jan 17): Box 627 College Station Easton, Pennsylvania
Home (till January 17): 4762 Southland Ave. Alexandria, VA 22312

Monday
January 3, 1966
Box 806 Williamsburg, VA
(Susie lived in Barrett Hall, Room 216.)

Dear Dick,

Thank you for your letter; I was both surprised and glad to receive it. Often it is easier to exchange ideas and become acquainted through letters than by spontaneous conversation.

I suppose it is, as you say, that beauty and meaning arise from pain and inconvenience. What a paradox! And how wonderful that people can and do transform their sorrowful experiences into new life concepts. The lady who cleans your dorm apparently possesses great personal courage (or faith) as well as the sympathetic understanding of others—since these two seem to interwork to give a new outlook. Such faith does feed our faith. She must be an admirable person.

I would like to hear more about your work in Easton. Is it with adults as well as with children? Last Wednesday, you were saying that it was difficult to actually help the children in a significant way because of their poor family backgrounds. Perhaps my idealism misleads me, but I don't feel that the task is an impossible one. Certainly many problems are involved, and we cannot hope to help all the children with whom we work. Nevertheless, we can give them experiences with books, music, art, etc. that they could not hope to receive elsewhere. Through such repeated experiences, they may, in different degrees and in their individual ways, improve and even overcome their deprived environments. Certainly our personal satisfaction is very great, but we can also be rewarded by the gradual change in the children themselves. If I seem a little carried away (!), please excuse me and attribute it to my interest in children and in teaching. Since we talked for only a short time, I'm not sure whether or not you agree with this view. Some people (my roommate at school, for example) feel that I'm too idealistic, as perhaps I am.

Exams don't begin for us until January 17, so we have two more weeks of classes in this first semester. I am studying at William and Mary, a school which I like very much. Between classes, I work with a small group of second graders—slow readers who need extra drilling.

Have you finished your exams and first semester yet? I believe you said that Lafayette was your school.(?) Thank you again for your letter_I hope I have not been too long in answering it.

Sincerely,

Susan Bruch

Address at school (until Jan. 25): Box 806 Williamsburg, VA
Home address (after Jan.25): 15 West Howell Ave. Alexandria, VA

I'm still at the other end of my arm

**If you watch carefully you will see me
Flickering between impulse and restraint,
Desire and satisfaction, deferral of
Some Great Plan and scraping the sink.
I exist between your whickering in the night
And the music in my teeth. There I was,
Clawing through a pail of oysters,
Steeped in their own liquor. There I was,
Walking with you down Duke of Gloucester
When you finally walked away from home.
Here, I still hold your hand. I'm still
At the other end of my arm. Just look.
Here.
Here. Just look.**

May 1, 2007

Friday
January 14, 1966
Box 627 College Station
Easton, Penn.
Dear Susan,

How's the old brain holding out—are you finding the things you put there where you left them? I always become light-headed and reluctant to study during test week. It's usually a pretty good time to catch up on sleep. The end is at hand, happily.

I'm still at home, and could remain here till January 23, but will probably leave next Wednesday, the 19th. The week of the 17th is fraternity Rush week at Lafayette, for freshmen and fraternity men. We "independents" are not required to come back until the 24th, but there are books to buy and things to do before classes begin.

You asked about the Dock Street program (our work in Easton) and talked about teaching children. "Dock Street" is the name we have given to the rather isolated community of several West Easton families who live between the foundry and the dye works and beneath the railroad. When I say "We" I mean the church at Lafayette, and specifically, now, our church of 8 or 9 people who feel that to be obedient Christians they must be among the people of Dock Street. You asked whether our program includes adults. We have made it a point to try and become friends of the children's parents, to offer our help—such as it is—when they want it. We make an attempt to teach the children, we talk with and listen to the adults.

The problems of teaching children—underprivileged to overprivileged—have been going unresolved through my mind for the last four weeks. Much of what I said about the necessity of our not being surprised when our efforts to improve children do not succeed was only a reflection of my experience with kids at Dock Street. We are an inexperienced untrained crew, and such discouragements as we have from time to time are understandable. Of course you can see changes in the children if you work long enough—if you get to know them on another level such changes for the better may be less surprising. We rejoiced when some of the smaller kids began to open out of their shells. We are proud of an older girl with a troubled family life who on her own decided to join a local church, and who is seriously planning on becoming a nurse after high school graduation. I remember going into a hospital room with one boy, to visit—rather fearfully—the lady who had chased him away from her house. He was happy about it, afterwards.

Of course you can see changes in the children. What is disheartening to me, in an unreal melodramatic way—since I am not personally, not "viscerally" but, instead am mentally involved—is the dim prospect for undoing in any child what has already been done. To what extent does a person, regardless of his later childhood experiences, return to the answers he received from his parents in earliest childhood, when he is making a response to adult problems? So many small decisions a person makes in every day, so many small "nameless, unremembered acts," which are the great substance of our lives. We tend less to rely on reason, it seems to me, than upon feeling when we make our small decisions. We are predisposed or inclined to feel a decision should be made one way or the other, and to use, rather than be guided by our reasoning faculties.

It's just the way we human creatures are. My point is not a novel one. To what extent are our predisposed feelings determined by the answers we receive as young

children from our parents (answers spoken or unspoken—the crucial question is what did the attitude of the parents communicate?). Rejected, accepted or accepted and amplified, how much is our parents' way of looking at things our norm?

I'm glad I took this opportunity to write that down; it clears my thinking a good deal. It's probably influenced more than a little by my roommate's talk about child psychology. It is also a part of my experience which I'm trying to understand.

It was also too long. Will stop now. Enjoy your vacation. By the way, besides being test week it's also week of prayer for Christian unity—they're behind in their homework too.

Shalom,
Dick R.

In this letter, copied from Susie's first draft, the strikethroughs are shown. These strikethroughs show how much effort we were putting into understanding each other, only a month after we had met. We knew that every word we put down was going to be re-read.

January 29, 1966
Alexandria, VA

Saturday night

Dear Dick,

What a lot of snow we have had! I don't think I've ever seen so much as in the last few days! Williamsburg got 13 ½ inches **and I just barely got home (after exams) through it all things were really backed up down there.** ~~I almost didn't get home after exams.~~ **Everyone was afraid** to get out in it, and students were about the only ones to brave it at all! We had some trouble getting home after exams were over. Since all the buses were running late, however, I made it—only to get more snow yesterday here at home. But it is really quite beautiful—especially while it is still falling. I guess you have been having a lot of it too?

How is school going? I imagine your classes are keeping you busy—as classes always do. What courses are you taking now? William and Mary has registration on Thursday. I'm hoping to schedule an education course, math, an English course on Shakespeare, and 2 French courses; however, one can never be certain of anything until after registration. So many little things can upset one's plans. Well *c'est la vie*.

Yesterday I took a Civil Service Summer employment Exam. I'm hoping to get a job with the government again this summer. Last summer, I worked for National Archives and enjoyed it immensely; so I have my fingers crossed to get there again.

I know exactly what you mean about getting lightheaded and wanting to sleep during exams! Without classes to regulate the day, it is easy to let yourself relax while time slips up on you.

I was glad to hear more about your Dock Street program. It sounds like must be a real opportunity to practice Christianity, and I know the people families involved—the ones who receive your help—are thankful for your concern, even if they do not always express to express your beliefs by acting upon them. About teaching children—I suppose that I tend fail have failed to consider seriously deeply pondered not considered deeply enough haven't given enough consideration to the depth of

impression enough and to ponder upon the influence a child's very early influence of a child's very earliest experiences. How can we know beforehand who will who does have the most influence on a child's development? It would seem, as you suggest say suggest, that parents have priority since their contact begins at an earlier age, and is of a more prolonged nature than that of a single teacher. I would like to ponder this point further, for it does seem that we "feel" our small decisions rather than reason them. **Perhaps the answer is that a teacher can affect children only slightly** and that basically a child does return to his parents' way (or norm). Perhaps the answer for helping underprivileged children cannot be found in one, two, or even three generations. It may well be that teachers can't significantly change the "feelings" or norms of such children, unless the change occurs over several generations. But how can we know? ~~If a teacher accepts the~~

As you can see, your letter raised many questions for me. I am reminded of the psychologist Jung, who refused to treat troubled children unless their parents also became his patients.

May I bring up another topic, one that has bothered me for some time? This letter is becoming way too lengthy; ~~and so I will only mention it briefly~~ I should probably skip it, ~~altogether now~~ but here it is briefly. What course of action would a Christian take when his country is at war? If he fights, how can he (or she) reconcile actions with beliefs? I am thinking specifically of Viet Nam and of the President's decision to resume bombing. ~~I am very undecided.~~ Should we as Christians oppose his action or must we as Americans support him?

On looking back over what I've written, it seems I've done nothing but ask questions? Really, I'm not totally indecisive, just puzzled in trying to understand these things. ~~I hope I have not bored you.~~

Good luck with your work—both college and the Dock Street program. ~~I'd like to hear about the people you experiences you encounter—the girl who wants to be a nurse, etc., the boy and the hospital visit, and of course about the ...small children...~~ And don't get buried beneath all this snow?

Sincerely,

Here's the final version of the letter above.

Sunday
January 30, 1966
Alexandria, VA

Dear Dick,

What a lot of snow we have had! I've never seen so much as in the last few days! Williamsburg got 13 ½ inches and things were really backed up down there. Everyone was afraid to get out in it, and students were about the only ones to brave it at all! Since the buses were running late, we had some trouble getting home after exams were over. However, we made it at last—only to get more snow yesterday here at home. But it is really quite beautiful, especially while it's still falling. I guess you have been having a lot of it too?

How is school going? I imagine your classes are keeping you busy—as classes always do. What courses are you taking now?

William and Mary has registration on Thursday. I'm hoping to schedule an education course, math, an English literature course, and two French courses; however, one can never be certain of anything until after registration. So many things can upset one's plans. Well, *c'est la vie*.

Yesterday I took a Civil Service summer employment exam. I'm hoping to have a job with the government again this summer. Last summer, I worked for National Archives and enjoyed it immensely; so I have my fingers crossed to get there again.

I know exactly what you mean about getting lightheaded and wanting to sleep during exams! Without classes to regulate the day, it is easy to let yourself relax while time slips up on you.

I was glad to hear more about your Dock Street program. It must be a real opportunity to express your beliefs by acting upon them.

About teaching children—I haven't given enough consideration to the depth of impression of a child's very earliest experiences. Who does have the most influence on a child's development? It would seem as you suggest, that parents have priority since their contact begins at an earlier age and is of a more prolonged nature than that of a single teacher. I would like to ponder this point further, for it does seem that we "feel" our small decisions rather than reason them. Perhaps a teacher can affect children only slightly, and that basically a child does return to his parents' way (or norm). Perhaps the answer for helping underprivileged children can't be found in one, two, or even three generations. It may well be that teachers can't significantly change the "feelings" or norms of such children unless the change occurs over several generations. But how can we know? As you can see, your letter raised many questions for me. I am reminded of the psychologist Jung, who refused to treat troubled children unless their parents also became his patients.

May I bring up another topic, one that has bothered me for some time? This letter is becoming way too lengthy; I should probably skip it, but here it is briefly. What course of action should a Christian take when his country is at war? If he fights, how can he (or she) reconcile actions with beliefs? I am thinking specifically of Viet Nam and the President's decision to resume bombing. Should we as Christians oppose his action or must we as Americans support him?

On looking back over what I've written, it seems I've done nothing but ask questions! Really, I'm not totally indecisive, just puzzled in trying to understand these things. Good luck with your work—both college and the Dock Street program. And don't get buried beneath all this snow!

Sincerely,

Susan

Greetings

Islam enjoins followers to veil their eyes and bodies. The Diné, and other native peoples, consider it impolite to stare at a stranger's face. Like strangers in an elevator or a city cross-walk, they keep their eyes down—a trait that white Americans consider sneaky or dishonest. Why would you look down or look away if you had nothing to hide? Indians greet each other with “*Namaste*”—“I greet the spirit within you.” White Americans like the hearty handshake and eye-to-eye contact, followed by “Hello, I’m Joe. I sell bolts. What do *you* do?” When the draft board sent greetings, on the other hand, spirits sank. Every kind of greeting is a probe of our skills, asking us, “Do you know what to do next?” A greeting invites us to take a step, but it keeps the risk small.

Susie noticed that I always nodded and spoke to strangers that we passed on the street. Both of us were shy, so it surprised her. She was apprehensive about inviting trouble. My explanation was that I checked the eyes of those around me, and tried to acknowledge anyone who invited a greeting. Many people do not give permission for you to greet them, of course. They look down, look away, are preoccupied—or feign preoccupation. Permission is obligatory.

Some young Muslim men assume that any woman with uncovered hair is inviting the inevitable release of their most violent feelings, just as some young white men claim that their sexual violence is released by certain clothing or behavior. Permission is obligatory. There’s nothing inevitable about our response to invitations. Invitations to be greeted are easily permitted, but they may or may not be followed by invitations to talk. Intimate invitations are in no way the inevitable result of greeting and talking with someone else, yet we are taught by both religious fear, and by the slam-bang interactions portrayed in movies, that greetings are niter-compounds, too explosive to handle. So the Muslim woman veils herself, the Jew hedges himself about with the law, and strangers are distrusted.

In the last few years, many people have come to prefer their electronic devices—Bluetooth and other insectoid objects budding from their ears—to the world around them. I regret seeing devices and veils instead of invitations. I regret seeing people talking into their devices and disregarding their surroundings. Presence is undermined while greetings and invitations atrophy. We grunt, react, and ignore.

And by reducing all the gradations of human interactions to all-or-none responses, it is not surprising that a man can justify a violent act as an inevitable release of uncontrollable behavior. He has had no training in permission, invitations, greetings, and conversation. He has been trained that passion is a fire that can only be controlled by the actions of others who veil themselves. But we do bad acts, not because the devil made us do them, but because we are uninformed and unskilled at making decisions. The Egyptian policemen who make lewd and intimidating comments to any woman, veiled or unveiled, who passes by, are not provoked by the women but by their own uninformed and unskilled social development.

Fear and ignorance lead to shields, veils, blockades, codes, passwords, and other means of self-protection—stopping the rivers between minds. Some of this is necessary, but we exaggerate risk. Susie had always been amazed by her mother’s ability to converse with anyone. In fact, her mother not only conversed, she made allies.

Susie also noticed that people responded to my little greeting-ritual. She liked my explanation, and began to greet strangers a little more than she had in the past. On several occasions, she had good experiences—the Jones couple, who rescued her and the boys when she had a flat tire on Lee Highway, the insurance salesman who bumped the car and was so solicitous, the American Red Cross driver who drove her to chemotherapy when I couldn’t.

I like to think that I may have helped her, but the best invitation I ever received was the first time I saw her eyes—a gaze that greeted something within me. I had to speak to her. There was already something between us—“the Between that beckons from another’s eyes—not a thing or being, but a relationship, a domain whose variables rise from interactions and fall when we slip in betrayals. This passage lies through others’ eyes.” (See *Finding a Purchase*, 200.)

(9/5/2008)

January 20, 1966
Box 627, College Station
Easton, Pennsylvania

Dear Susan

To vary from the way I usually write letters I'm experimenting with an installment plan:

January 20

The last couple of days after getting back to school, though classes won't begin for another four days, have been rather busy. I've been straightening up my room and balancing my checking account. By the way, as I was throwing away old business advertisements, etc., I ran across this paragraph in a letter from a group called "World Vision.," *a propos*:

In this Thanksgiving season, a scene from Viet Nam shines in my memory: the radiant faces of mountain Christians singing their thanks. A song, here—in Viet Nam? These are the displaced and dispossessed. This is a country at war. Their homes are lost, their crops destroyed. Yet they sing. And as I listened, my thoughts moved to the words of 2 Cor. 4:15, "Indeed, it is for your sake that all things are ordered, so that, as the abounding grace of God is shared by more and more, the greater may be the chorus of thanksgiving that ascends to the glory of God..."
--

There's a light layer of snow on the ground, but thankfully we have not experienced any of the tremendously low temperatures (40 below) elsewhere in this country, Canada, Britain and Siberia.

January 22

As you can see, I used up the black ink—writing a report on the Dock St. work (in which I am scheduled or "programmed" to "faze out" of as the semester progresses, to borrow some expressions from the Department of Defense) It's rather late, and snow has been falling steadily for several hours; approximately 6" is forecast. The last few days here at school with nothing required to be done have been rather enjoyable. Have been visiting friends; this evening Ken Henke and I played some inane games for a couple of hours or so called "Secret Agent," "Uncle Wiggly," and "Candy Land." Have been looking over the books we will be using this semester. Besides the science courses, I'm taking a course in the Middle Ages, from St. Augustine to Ockham. It will be conducted on a small discussion group basis, and looks very interesting.

January 23

Well, I just got back from Downtown. About five of us walked to Dock St. this afternoon and had snowball fights, sledding, king of the mountain and a little 'caving'—the kids played too. Just had Chow Mein and egg roll and a long discussion with the waitress in the White House restaurant. Church attendance this morning was small, both because of the snow and the fraternities' Saturday night activities. The small group of us in the Sunday discussion plotted a conspiracy beforehand to agree with everything the pastor said (the topic of these discussions is always the morning's sermon—we invite many visiting preachers to speak during the year—and consensus is an anomaly.) He was completely taken in, and decided it was just "mass hysteria." The highlight of the

discussion was a long quotation from *Lamentations* in Latin by one of the fellows, to show his hearty agreement with the choice of Scripture for the morning.

January 28

The end of the first week. Tomorrow I will go to the library at 8:30 for a library job lasting till noon. Then tomorrow afternoon a group of us will be going to a Franciscan Friary nearby for a short afternoon “retreat.” We will discuss church membership, and especially an idea about yearly reconstitution and rededication of membership.

Have been enjoying all classes, reading, labs this last week. Have enjoyed entering into fellowship with friends. Last night was the first time we have shared the meal of bread and wine in the new Chapel of Hogg Hall. The room which is now a chapel was formerly a lounge.

Across the hallway or foyer in Hogg, from the Chapel are the beginnings of a coffee-house that our student church is building. We got the idea from the Potter’s Coffee House of the Church of the Savior in Washington. I am sure that this is the beginning of a rich history for that, now dirty cluttered room. By the way, temperature finally hit bedrock today, with an ear tingling 0 F.

January 30

Whew. It’s about 9:30 p.m. The wind is howling outside raising up clouds of snow—as it has been doing all day. Snow was falling last night at this time and didn’t let up till 5 p.m. today. It reminds me of South Dakota, and blizzards. Last night at the friary about 20 of us gathered for our retreat. The consensus of the retreat seems to have been that the college church will begin to expect some sort of deeper dedication of its members, symbolized in an annual recommitment to membership. So we will be visiting the other members of the church within the next few weeks to see how many people will decide to do this for the rest of the year (i.e. recommit themselves).

Gary (my roommate) and I have been listening to the school cancellation reports on the radio. Students and faculty live too close by for anything short of a hurricane to affect our scheduled classes, however.

February 4

I was pleased to receive your letter in the mail today. For the last few days it seems like all that Box 627 contains is magazine advertisements, stupendous offers and so forth. Our snow, by the way, is becoming slushier and slushier—but it still manages to replenish itself overnight. How did registration work out? I remember registration here freshman year. After being squeezed thru the door to the gym in the press of about all the students in the college, some of us were lifted off of our feet and ultimately found ourselves expelled into rather than entered into the gym. Interested to hear that you took a Civil Service test, since I will be taking one tomorrow morning at 11:30, in hopes of some sort of biological or medical summer work.

February 6

It’s late, or, rather, early. Yet I had planned at the beginning of the day to finish this interminable letter (along with some other letters to people in Alexandria who

wonder whether I'm alive or frozen blue upside down in a snowdrift), so this should be the last installment.

A very busy day. Beginning with library work, then the 3 hr. long Civil Service test (I was expecting something shorter), then the laundry. I was just about to settle down to some studying around 7:30 when Harry Wagner, the church organist, and also an elder, told me about a performance downtown by a visiting quartet from the Metropolitan Opera for which he had two free tickets. The performance was at 8:30.

We were off and running and didn't return until 11:0. About the performance itself—I didn't understand their version of French, or much about the music they were singing. It was superficially enjoyable, then, but my enjoyment consisted more in going, and talking, and hunting in the crowd of strangers for a ride back to school at the end.

On the way down we were given a ride by a soldier home on leave for 2 weeks from Vietnam; this brings me to your question(s). These have also been my questions (and questions of other students as well) over the last year.

Every day there are comments. This soldier: "It is a good cause—keeping the Communists out of Vietnam" A history teacher ". . . some people think it's a moral issue—let's not get into morality" Letter to the editor: "Is it in the national interest" Can a political problem be solved by purely military means alone?" Walter Lippman "What about the blank check of authority the Congress gave the president in much different circumstances? We need debate of this issue—the Congress must not become a rubber stamping institution. . . " C.S. Lewis (*Mere Christianity*): "Does loving your enemy mean not punishing him? No, for loving myself does not mean that I ought not to subject myself to punishment. . . If you had committed murder, the Christian thing to do would be to give yourself up to the police and be hanged. It is therefore , in my opinion, perfectly right for a Christian judge to sentence a man to death or a Christian soldier to kill an enemy. . . There are two Greek words: the word kill and the word to murder; . . Christ uses the word—to murder. All killing is not murder. . . " The Proposed Confession of the Presbyterian Chch: "Conflict among nations defies the justice and peace which governments exist to serve. . . The church is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies in its own life and to commend to the nation as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace."

You ask whether we as Christians should oppose or support Government policy. I suppose one might ask, "What would Jesus do?" To this question Christians have not unanimously agreed upon an answer. The question we and other peoples are asking is perhaps "are our costly, destructive, ambiguous programs carried on in a small foreign state morally right?" Hans Morgenthau, a man whose book we studied last semester, would say that the idea of morality with respect to this problem is superimposed. The real issue at stake, he would say, is the political power conflict between two great powers, using smaller nations like pawns in sacrifice to protect the queen. In history the church seems to have heeded its calling differently—from holy wars to refusal to be part of a resistance movement to overthrow a dangerous leader. . . both times—the Crusades, 20th century Nazism—the church was wrong—or a part of the church was wrong—each time in a different way— I presently believe—and my beliefs change—that we individual Christians ought to be asking, studying, praying and acting with relation to what Jesus is doing. To ask what he would do implies that we are seeking to formulate for ourselves a

way of acting which seems to us most like the way of Jesus. I disagree with this because I see in this an idea and an ideal rather than obedience under the kingship of a Lord.

Where does all this leave us? Unclear. And too much said.

Marhaba,
Dick

Hans Morgenthau was the name of the author of my book on international politics. The word "marhaba" is an Arab greeting. I was continually searching for ways to end these letters. I couldn't say "Love," although I wanted to, and "Sincerely" was too formal. So I used religious terms—"May your good fortune increase" (Marhaba), "Peace" (Shalom), Mizpah. This last one literally means "Watch tower," or "heap of witness." (See 1 Sam 7:12. and Gen.31:49.) My Granny Gage used Mizpah to end her letters.

Here's what Susie wrote to her parents on February 15, 1966: "I also got a very nice letter from Dick—3 pages, back and front. Guess what? He's human! He mentioned having snowball fights, games in the snow, playing "Uncle Wiggley" and other 'children's' games! I must write him now. . . ." In the same letter, responding to all of the mail from Alexandria since the beginning of the month, she writes: "Thank you for the lovely valentines—they were all lovely & so nice, especially the one from W. Sullivan (sounds like a nephew of W.D.!) That was such a sweet one from the 3 of you too—with the little girl on it. The candy is just dee-lish! I'm really enjoying it!" Susie loved chocolate, but she didn't gobble it. She liked to study the lid and decide which kind to have next. She would take it, savor it, close the box, and sometimes not come back to it for a day or more. She goes on: "The teachers' State scholarship forms came, so I'm sending them on to you all to sign. I always feel like I'm signing my life away when I sign such legal things! There is so much red tape involved in it too. Please be careful when you sign—I'm sure you will of course—but it would be horrible if we had to go thru this all again with another form (like last year). And this year I'll try to be good & remember to renew it!"

"Nancy has just given me a big pep talk about the Pledge Dance on the 19th of March. It seems that I'm trapped into it! If I don't go, I'll loose (sic) about 3 friends—not to mention ΦM sisters . . . so . . . I guess I'd better come home and decide what about a dress. The best weekend—work wise—would be this one. Would that be O.K.? I left my bus schedule at home, but I'll try to get one tomorrow & let you know what bus I'll be on. I'll come Friday about 6-ish, so we can go shopping on Saturday if that's O.K. with you all. Don't worry about my missing a class on Saturday—it doesn't hurt to do it once in awhile, especially when my grades are good, which mine are, thank heaven! (What a long sentence & a bad one!) I got the nicest letter today from the Dean of Women, saying that I am officially on Dean's list and 'entitled to all the privileges of that honor'!!! I'm going to frame it! . . . Do you think Rabbit would really not mind making my dress for the dance? I would love to have her do it; I'm sure it would be much prettier than anything we could buy, but I don't want to impose on her, you know. It would be a tremendous task & one which I wouldn't want to assume myself. I just don't have the time right now to write her too. I'll have to talk with her when I come home.

"About an escort—Margie, Oscar's roommate across the hall has dated a boy named Howard Harris, but they have just recently decided to stop dating. Anyway, Howard was in my French class last semester, so I know him fairly well. Margie thinks he would like to go to the dance & Beth suggested I ask him. It would be a "big-brother" sort of thing partly because Howard is younger than I am, but that would be an advantage because I wouldn't be as nervous as with a blind date for example. What do you all think! (Did you follow that confused explanation?)

"I'm so sorry about Mr. Whiskers's fight. Is he all right now? Is his tail O.K.? I can't bear to think he won't be able to hold it straight up like he used to. Do you think it will be

permanently affected? Mommie, what do you think about an operation? I hate that mean grey cat—he is just awful. I do hope that there aren't any like him among those 4 new cats. I can't imagine Mr. W. on a leash, but I guess the fact that he has followed Rabbit & Panch (of his own free will) helped some. That's funny about Rentie grabbing him and sweet, too. In her eyes, that must have been the supreme sacrifice!

"I don't know anything about Parents' Day at the College. Students are the last to know what's going on around here! But, of course, I would love to have you all come. Daddy, I'm sure hope you had a Happy Birthday! I was thinking of you on Sunday! Hope your cake is good. I'm glad about Neil's being accepted at Mullenberg! Isn't that tough school to get into? Did Aunt Mae say whether or not he wanted that for his 1st choice? Oh, I just read your next sentence, Mommie—he wants Penn State. I sure hope he gets it. Wonder if he applied to Lafayette?"

*"Thank you for the \$1. I guess the old gov. will come too soon. I had to write another check today & that left \$26. Well, I must from hence with haste. Nancy is preparing a snack for us—she, Beth & I are starving! (as usual this time at night!) Be seeing you soon if its O.K. with you all. Perhaps you could call if you've already made plans for Sat. Love so much, Susie Byrd"
(She drew a bird.)*

***These letters are a sample of the many I have copied for our sons Bill & Rob.*

Gains Lost

**Off the jetty, yellow heads
Of steel drums leaking suet
Rise and fall with crowned heads,
Babies thrown overboard,
Offensive eyes plucked out,
And other cargo, jettisoned
As my hull lists and seamen slide,
Screaming denials,
Back into the deep-seated lottery
That promised riches.**

**First, it gave them in sweet smiles,
And grins hidden from the crowd,
And soft whispers in the night.
Then it took back our winnings;
Then took prospects, visions, hopes,
And vanished us past possibility;
Then took domains we'd jettisoned
For one more hour,
And took that too.**

After E.B. Browning

(the lines you quoted from Number Six)

**When your smoke became blue sky,
When your vapor became rivers,
When your ashes became a layer
Of dust that touches the Earth
As lightly as your hand once, on my arm,
You were already a fact—
Solid as a slope of pines
Sweetly exhaling the cool night air
With me standing “henceforward
In your shadow” miles below.**

Here is the complete poem on which I improvised in *The Profit of Doom*. William Cullen Bryant's poem was a version of an earlier troubadour poem. It is a vision of the catastrophe of transience. *Any personal catastrophe is the end of the world*. Cataclysms burst around us every day. We miss most of them.

**All things that are on earth shall wholly pass away
Except the love of God, which shall live and last for aye.
The forms of men shall be as they had never been;
The blasted groves shall lose their fresh and tender green;
The birds of the thicket shall end their pleasant song,
And the nightingale shall cease to chant the evening long.
And the strong and fearless bear, in the trodden dust shall lie;
And the dolphin of the sea, and the mighty whale, shall die.
And realms shall be dissolved, and empires be no more,
And they shall bow to death, who ruled from shore to shore;
And the great globe itself (so the holy writings tell),
With the rolling firmament, where the starry armies dwell,
Shall melt with fervent heat—they shall all pass away,
Except for the love of God, which shall live and last for aye.**

—William Cullen Bryant

"The Love of God" from the
Provençal version by Bernard Rascas

From the beginning, my feelings for Susie were both an overpowering attraction and an overpowering dread of loss—profit and doom. She watched our German neighbors buying spritzed wreathes and flowers to adorn the graves on All Saints Day in the town cemetery, which was surrounded by a wall pocked by artillery rounds. She couldn't help feeling that it was a morbid custom, but I wrote:

Alle Heiligen

**Unsevered leaves, still sunned in golden fall
Above the city's separating wall;
Unsevered leaves, no more tip-edge of reach,
Still held and sunned; like some archaic speech
They seem to sleep in postures of belief,
Raised facets on unpolished stone; each leaf,
Intended target of one baffled ray,
Since yellow cannot make the light delay.
When I am a memorial behind
This separating wall, like these aligned
Beneath the golden trees, my sunny love
With her inventive light may please to move
And pause among my leaves before they fall,
Read summer's fading speech, and green recall.**

It was my hope that reading what I had written and listening to what I had composed would comfort her after I died. The poem was extended into a crown of sonnets in *The Profit of Doom*. Now I have been tricked: Susie died first. Glad as I am to spare her grief and to have been able to help her, I would have been glad to die just to gain her another five or seven years of life and the summation and serenity that might have come from them.. What is the “love of God” that endures? I think that this is shorthand for our genuinely caring relationships. A genuine relationship is authentic, not virtual, ideological, or delusional. In such a relationship, one cares for and about others. A personal, mutually empathetic, loving relationship will help you to show compassion to

others. This is what keeps us human—caring about every breath, every heart beat, every flicker of the beloved’s eyelid, and aching to make responses worthy of this relationship.

Another early poem, sent to Susie, and often re-worked since, was:

**Near you, I near a rarity—
Dear disparity!—
I wished to know you near,
Yet near as I know you,
It is only near.**

In *The Profit of Doom*, it became:

**Some take love’s rarity
The famine sign of general despair;
Probing to gain common purchase,
They measure, tune, filter,
Pass wave-lengths
Dish to dish, deep to deep:
As if those who live in currents
Feel no sweep outwards,
In all ways they return inwards . . .**

And in *Twelve Ensembles*, it became an aria.

Epitaphs

Once, when feeling low, Susie wrote these epitaphs:

Jo—A life of ease & elegance lay beyond her reach like a land of dreams.

Daddy—The only thing he ever did was to mend a patch & make things last a few more years.

Me—She was a sponge who tried to absorb all she admired & who succeeded at nothing.

Dick—“Gladly would he learn & gladly teach.”

Rentie—Gentle, loving and kind, she was a gracious lady.

Mommie—She gave away all she had and saw what she wanted to see.

Susie and I were alike in a couple of ways that we seldom discussed. We were both “sponges” who tried to take in and learn as much as we could, and yet always felt unsuccessful about it. We were also both unwilling to deceive ourselves with rosy pictures, however sad this trait made us. She tried to put it out of mind and I tried to write it out of mind. Because of this trait, we both worked on making the most of the present and enjoying each other. If we were angry, we always reconciled before going to bed.

**I want to take care of you some day.
Why? Because—because of so many things.
Because of your smile, your love, your hugs, your kisses.
Because of your laugh, your sympathy, your understanding.
Because of our kinship of spirits and minds.
Because you love cats and books and flowers and spring.
Because you are kind and thoughtful and dear.
Because you are sunshine and warmth and love.
And if God wills that these pass into memory,
I want to take care of you for memory's sake.
I want to take care of you because you took
care of me—lovingly, gently, laughingly.
My friend, my playmate, my teacher, my comforter,
the center of my world then. My mother.**

Susie wrote this for her mother.



When these words were written to her mother, some time between 1994 and 1998, Susie was increasingly concerned about Ginny, Truman and Jo. She loved to visit so that she could drive them around, do errands, take them out to eat, and help in other ways. This wasn't easy for her to do because we lived 50 miles away in Warrenton and she had a full and stressful career. Finally, in 1999, we made the difficult decision to leave our house of 28 years, the garden that Susie loved, and most of the people we knew. We returned to Alexandria to be closer so that Susie could help as much as she could for as long as she could, especially after the deaths of Truman, Jo and cousin Robert Johnson. When she could no longer help, it fell to Dick. He could not help as well as Susie, but he did what he could. Ginny was fortunate to make a friend in church, Marnie Brown, who helped us all.

Contrasts

(We wrote this together.)

1

Hers is an unvoiced care;
Mine all the contentions of design.

With summer leaves she shares
what reedless wind assigns.

With promises to gain on time
I would repair the breeze.

She's unpreoccupied as trees
Winds spare to stand on steep inclines.

2

He: "You are, as wave's node,
center of a branch burst into flower,
or reef's edge where intersections meet,
still. Still
center of our lives, you hold
our pitch, seed home's gray shell
with geode flowers."

She: "You are an island.
Separate, complete unto yourself.
Your connection to the land is buried
deep, deep.
I was a peninsula—
alone on many sides
but connected."

I wanted to turn the wind into music. Susie was satisfied with the wind

A brief meditation on Shakespeare's Sonnet about redundancy (Number 66)

Oh, Hope has found and passed me.

As Seek tags Hide,
So I am recognized and superseded,
My Find, found out.

No more is needed.

You did not die alone.

Bliss.

Our Object's realized.

Now Heaven is behind.

(On an evening walk down Peacock Lane on September 18, 2008, forty two years after Susie and I met there at the Bayers' home on December 24, 1965. See also the Vagrant's aria in *Twelve Ensembles*.)

September 25, 2009

Now I enter upon a new life. I shall continue to compile the sources for Bill and Rob, but they will not necessarily be in a *finished* form. I shall also try to finish the *Marginal Notes Project*, because it is almost completed. I will post the completed works on our website, marginalnotesinwordsandmusic.org. Grander ideas are tabled for the present—perhaps permanently.

R. Rose

On my way to Norman, Chicago, and Santa Fe.