

While the sonnet is in perfect Shakespearean form, I don't think it is my best. I don't think it is particularly easy, either. No one has given me a plausible reason for its being selected most. But in thinking about the six presentations from my book this summer at St. Andrews and Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral, I'm exploring one — possibly unconscious — dynamic that may explain its favored status.

The sonnet may appear at first to be about a merely human love relationship gone sour. The speaker chooses to confine the love to a locket because it is so overwhelming, just as we, fatigued by compassion, sometimes shut down our feelings in order to get on with our lives.

Then, in line 9, a forecast, using images from different faiths. The rapture in which the dead and living in Christ are "caught up in the clouds" to be eternally united in His kingdom is from 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In ancient Confucian thought, society would be set right by imitating the emperor honoring the gods by bowing to the South where they reside. In some Buddhist thought, the bodhisattva Maitreya is the future Buddha. Some Jews look for a Messiah who will establish the rule of Israel to bring peace to the world. All examples point to hope beyond the present distress, a desire that the mess of our world will be transformed.

But the couplet, the last two lines, if read closely, though phrased in the future, subverts itself when we contemplate "God's desire." God offers us now both the cross and life abundant. That's the package for this life, both to redeem the suffering around us and to take pleasure in God's gifts. We can bring comfort to disaster. We can find joy in duty to the world.

Ambrose of Milan wrote that we are

simultaneously condemned and saved. Perhaps he meant that love brings both suffering and ecstasy. If we desire to know God, then choosing to love the world as it is, as God does, with all its evil, is, in a sense, our present salvation.

Religious maturity is found in desiring to love as God loves. Julian of Norwich wrote that it is God who teaches us to desire, and that He is the reward of all true desiring, and that all shall be well. When the locket confining our love of the world melts, we are raptured, Maitreya stirs, the Emperors bow, Messiah comes; and then, in tears or laughter or quiet presence, our desire is released and the Glory of God appears.

84. A Postmodern Faith

For a far more extensive theological discussion of Sonnet 84, visit VernBarnet.com, click on INTERVIEWS, and go to Part 7.



The poetic form does not merely contain a sentiment as a glass contains water. Rather speak of the grail containing wine; the meaning of each is intensified by the other. In poetry the form and the sentiment are as intimately related as the body and the soul.

The sonnets are arranged according to the sequence of the Mass. From the Paleolithic to the present, A to Z, from American Indian to Zoroastrian, religious themes are explained in the glosses. Online aids include YouTube videos of dozens of people reading from the book, a song, interviews, a "concordance," commentary, and corrections.

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Introductions to Nine Sonnets

from

Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire

*From Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral
2017 Feb 2 Candlemas program, page 7,
before the sonnets were read by Shake-
spearean actor Matt Schwader —*

1. Al-Fatiha: Opening Instruction

The sonnets in my book follow the order of the Christian Mass. But I wanted at the outset to show my indebtedness to other faiths, so the title of the first sonnet is Al-Fatiha: Opening Instruction. The name of the first Surah (chapter) in the Holy Qur'an is Al-Fatiha, which means The Opening. As readers open the book, I pray that the book will open readers of all kinds to find the longing in their hearts fulfilled in the burning brightness of God's love.

*Inflate, ignite, Each Page, with your turning;
inflare the god within who brings all burning.*

2. Don't Ask

"Don't Ask" recalls the dark days of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." This an ironic reminder that, from the Paleolithic to the present, human beings have found ways to record sacred times and places in the midst of anguish, dread, and unreasonable rule. Even when God seems dead, love and beauty redeem. As proof, I point to the great composer of "St Matthew Passion" and more, Johann Sebastian Bach.

*This is no realm of reasonable things.
By mortals God is killed, but still Bach sings.*

11. Kitchen Cockroach

Have you ever wondered whether a bug feels pain? One great religion, Jainism, takes extraordinary measures to protect all other creatures from suffering. In this sonnet I watch a hated cockroach

on a gas burner disintegrate, and I think of the gaseous galaxy which is our home, and our own suffering within it, and the fire on which Saint Lawrence was roasted. How does God view me enjoying the incineration of my cockroach?

*Is your pain lesser than Saint Lawrence felt?
Am I like you or God to see you melt?*

45. Husam - A Rumi Quartet

A tradition in Islam is that at the beginning, God was a hidden treasure, and yearned to be known. So he created the world. This idea intrigues me throughout my book, as I understand love as the urge to know and be known. Evolution's yearning — from atoms to DNA, to bodies, to societies — gives us the chance to behold the Hidden Treasure if we love; and if we love, the body and soul of our beloved reveals to us the meaning of the whole of creation.

*Such beauty in the body called your soul
proves Evolution fancies hints to Whole.*

84. Postmodern Faith: What is Truth?

For me, religion is worship, which I define as *awe + gratitude + service*. So I love any story of any faith that draws me to worship. My own tradition is Christian, and I know there are serious arguments about what actually happened historically. In a world filled with illusions, what best leads me to worship is not disputed facts but rather the power of myth, the sacred story. The truth it reveals is not what is factual but what is genuine. This cannot fail to inspire my worship.

*I know the Gospel is a pious tale,
but who cares facts when worship cannot fail?*

88. Love Locket [see *** below]

I've been surprised how popular this sonnet has become. It is not easy, with references to Christian, Buddhist, Chinese, and Jewish utopias. The sonnet appears personal. I am so hurt by my beloved that I lock up my love to be untouched by it, just as I would like to avert my eyes from watching the news about mass shootings, the suffering from fire and flood and accidents and war and terrorism. It is too much to bear. Yet only when I am open to the pain of others, and feel my own, am I human enough to be worthy of paradise.

*this locket forged on anvil from pure ire
will melt from love within, and God's desire.*

136. The Purpose of Sex

"Shlomo" is a Jewish form of "Solomon." From the erotic verses of the scripture attributed to him arises my celebration of the holiness of incarnate sexuality. Desire leads us to the blessing of knowing another intimately, and thus ourselves more deeply. This means not using another person, but abandoning all intentions except being completely open to see the other. And how can we love God purely, for His own sake, if we want to use God for our own purposes?

*Blow thrust gaze mask ride shimmer shade stop flow:
In intercourse His work we come to know.*

142. Tinnitus

The Agnus Dei, Lamb of God, movement of the Mass is poignant for me as I picture the slaughtered animal and the crucified Christ. This sonnet is an unjustifiable, perhaps blasphemous pity-party for myself as I discover my trivial pains and limits in the infirmities of age. And yet I give thanks that, like Christ, I have been enfleshed, and that though my senses are dimmed, touch remains redemptive.

*Lo! Incarnation is a word for quirks.
So let me know your flesh; my skin still works.*

154. Closing Instruction

This sonnet is the bookend to the Opening Instruction. I close the book with a farewell as if I were dying. My discovery is that my Beloved is everywhere about me, in every form of being, mechanical or alive as I experience the miracle of awareness. So as I prepare for my end, what remains is, in part, this book, and what I want most to say is:

*READER, learn your union from your rift.
From yours and others' ecstasy and pain
draw close to whom you love, and close remain.*

*** From *SPIRIT*, the magazine of the Episcopal Diocese of West Missouri, 2016 August, pages 8-9

Loving the World as God Loves the World

*Our desires to save the world, on one hand,
and to savor it, on the other,
can be reconciled only in God's love.*

"How have you changed since you became an Episcopalian?" a friend asked me. He knew about my lifelong and career-filled interest in world religions. He knew I still cherish Buddhist, Muslim, American Indian and other spiritual paths.

Closer to Tears

My friend knew I do not approach world religions "cafeteria-style," choosing this feature from one religion and that idea from another. I embrace each faith fully. One can relish both Rembrandt and Mapplethorpe, and find enchantment in both the Parthenon and the Taj Mahal. One is not violated by enjoying both a Mozart opera and a tune by Steely Dan. Somehow I've escaped the literalistic curse of thinking that religions must be mutually exclusive. Still, he found the commitment I made

in 2011 by being baptized a Christian quite puzzling.

"Well," my answer stumbled out, "by seeking to follow the example of Jesus with my whole heart, particularly through a kind of ongoing dialogue between ardent worship and the choices before me everyday, I've come to understand the creeds as pointers to the geography of life, with its horrors and its glories, manifested in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

"That's pretty abstract. Give me one specific example of how you have changed," he demanded.

"I've noticed that I cry a lot more easily," I confessed. "Sometimes I weep just sitting in the pew and watching the acolyte prepare the candles, a reassurance that out of all the ugliness and misunderstandings of the human condition, the folks gathering for worship need, as I do, to recognize the sacred and align ourselves anew with the Power that gives us hope and life abundant.

"Sometimes I am full of laughter as the service begins, but perhaps my eyes moisten when I see a parent and child taking communion at the altar rail — a fresh vision of the flow of generations, responding with varying degrees of illumination to the same call that Isaiah heard, in Chapter 6 of his book.

"I'm not prescribing behavior for anyone else, just reporting that both in church and throughout the week, I seem closer to tears, a little less hard-boiled. I've a long way to go to emulate the love and compassion and embrace of Jesus; but however minute the improvement, I like myself better."

Compassion Fatigue

Still, when I saw the news about the gun slaughter at the gay Orlando night club, and again the attack at the place in the Istanbul airport where I have been, my first reaction was to shut down emotionally, just as I did immediately after Sandy Hook, Columbine, Charleston, Virginia Tech, and so many other shocks.

No tears. "Well, what can we expect with the Supreme Court's Second Amendment ruling?" the analyst in me said aloud in anger. I thought about the year when I was responsible for obtaining the names of those killed in gun violence in Kansas City each week, and how emotionally weary I became adding them to the prayer list. My first reaction to Orlando was disgust that so many political leaders seem to be owned by the N.R.A. even though the public favors measures to reduce our orgies of violence.

As the news continued, I recognized my "compassion fatigue," but God's love never falters. God became human to suffer as we do. Finally I began to weep.

There is so much to weep about, the refuge crisis, the fires, the floods, the accidents, and the impaired health of those we love. Usually I put these things out of mind. But sometimes I look at the obituaries and see a young person I do not even know whose life has been snuffed out, and I start to weep.

A Sonnet of Desire

I've been puzzling why, from my new book, *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire*, one sonnet was the most popular in a contest with a score of racially diverse readers, young and old, gay and straight, professional and amateur, of several faiths, held at a Kansas City library for the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.