WHAT I BELIEVE ABOUT **BEYOND DEATH**

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An Open Letter to a dying-of-ALS* N.Y. sculptor-painter-photographer who asked me to do this Thinksheet for her

* Pop., Lou Gehrig's disease
Brit., motor-neuron disease

Dear _____,

I'm writing this not as an integrated essay but as a record of thoughts as they tumbled out of me beginning with Loree's conveying to me your request. I pray you will find them to be of some light, comfort, strength, peace, & joy. (That's praying a lot, but why pray small when God is great?) The numbering is to make it easy for you to respond in particular, if you so desire.

I say "tumbled out": the following **affirmations** (in boldface) may not be what, upon reflection, I'd consider the order of importance to me & are not apt to be in the order you'd find most helpful. You might, though, find it helpful if you re-number in the order of importance to you, then discuss your order with your husband & perhaps also some friend(s).

1 Throughout life, **we get "lightning flashes from the Beyond."** Why the quotes? My translation of "Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà...," the last & great work of French composer Olivier Messiaen, the premier of which we heard at Lincoln Center the very day Loree told me of your request, eight days ago. O.M. died at 84 in April, & the composition is the witness of a deeply Christian man as he meditated on (to use the words of this Thinksheet's title) what I believe about beyond death. (Nov'92 STAGEBILL: "This work was commissioned from the composer by Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic for the Orchestra's 150th anniversary....The work is a set of meditations on the Beyond and the heavenly Jerusalem, borrowing freely from the Book of Revelation (the Apocalypse of St.John); six of the eleven pieces": Rev.1,7,21,22. "The Gospels according to St.John, St.Matthew and St.Luke, and the First Epistle of St.John inspired the fifth, seventh, eighth and tenth pieces, and the second derives from the Book of Daniel. ¶It could be said that <u>Christ is constantly present</u> in these meditations." Symbolizing "joy and jubilation," the songs of 49 birds are heard, the Australian lyrebird especially "symbolizing the soul which beautifies itself 'as a bride who goes forth toward Christ, her husband.'" Too, the heavenly bodies appear, & "the colors of the precious stones of the Celestial Jerusalem." (In Dan. the three youths sing "'O stars of heaven, bless the Lord!'" And in Baruch, "'God called the stars, and they answered "Here we are!"'") The atmosphere is ecstatic celebration, with an "extremely large" orchestra, 128 musicians. ¶"In this work we find, side by side, the inward peace of the mystic, the anticipation of his Respose in the luminous tenderness of God...; superimpositions of colors resulting from hundreds of chords...; superimpositions of various time-scales" (planets, birds, "man who cries out of his thirst for God and desires to free himself of the body in which he is <u>imprisoned</u>)--long, lightning-short, rainbow-like "slow movements, songs of praise so calm as to seem already far removed from man's sense of time."

Why my underlinings? The first is to highlight the fact that for us Christians, the brightest lightning-flash is the Incarnation itself, God come to us in Jesus, who is for us, in the Spirit, "constantly present." More on this as we move along through this letter-Thinksheet. The second underlining is for you personally; for of all fatal diseases, yours is the most imprisoning; & you need to bear constantly in mind that there is that of you that need not be imprisoned & that may daily, & at life's end, be as a calf first let out its stall to go leaping into greenness (Malachi 4.2).

2 This world fits our eyes of flesh: if here & now we hear-hearken to God's word, **the next world will fit our eyes of faith.** (Note the Bible's order: hearing here, seeing there if we hear here.) Before beginning the concert, Zubin Mehta read to us a letter written to him by the dying composer. He is eager to see God, but after death will have to undergo a period of purification in preparation for the Beatific Vision. In at least one way, my dear_____, my body is worse than yours. I have known the terror of blindness in one eye, & daily know the threat to the other. In this world, we're all relatively blind, blind to the Vision God wants

to give us. But from another angle, you understand better than I do what I'm trying to say, for your eyes as an artist are more gifted & disciplined than mine. You have offered to God & the world hundreds of works of your eyes through your hands, & God has received them for the heavenly gallery leading to the Presence & Source of art & all else conformable to holiness, the character of God.

Says Jn. the Revelator (1.13-16), "I *saw* a Son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle around his breast; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his face shone like the sun. In his right hand he held seven stars...." That's the text of "Apparition [ie, appearance] of Christ Glorified," the first of the eleven movements of Messiaen's great symphony. The composer's widow was present (in a box, with the world's authority on his music), & Mehta asked us to take seriously the explications of each movement: Ms. Messiaen, he said, wrote them. Of this movement, she says "A chorale of praise...recalling...the plainchant Alleluia of Christ the King."...I can't resist sharing a few words on the other movements: (2, Dan.5.41) "The Constellation of Sagittarius" "in the center of our Galaxy....birdsongs...." (3, Rev.21.2) "The Lyrebird of the Bride-City." "Three lyrebirds singing together can fill a forest with the trumpeting, joyous colors of an entire orchestra." (4, Rev.7.3,1-2 ["the Sign of the Cross]) "The Chosen, Marked by the Seal." "The harmonies...chosen so that their colors combine to give the effect of stained-glass windows," with a carillon & birdsongs. (5, 1Jn.4.16) "Abide in Love." Recalls the point in M.'s opera, "St. François d'Assise," when Francis sings "We shall climb the ladders of heaven...." M.'s notations on this movement include the suggestion to see Ps.42.1. (6, Rev.8.2) "The Seven Angels with Seven Trumpets." (7, Rev.21.3-4, Mt.5.4, Rev.7.17) "....A vision of a rainbow of tenderness, a smile appearing when through tears we become aware of God, who comforts us and transforms our fears into dew drops." (8, Hab.3.4, Baruch 3.34, Job 38.7, Ps.19.1, L.2.14) "The Stars and the Glory," ten sections concluding with "a victorious chorale...*fortissimo*: 'Glory in the Highest!'...in the highest heights of Heaven." (9) Quotes from Dom. J. de Monléon: "The tree of Life represents the Humanity of the Word"; "The elect will gather the fruits of this wonderful tree, and they will sing like birds in its branches." "What could be more tempting for an ornithologist-composer than to imagine Eternal Life as an infinite tree representing Christ, with the souls of the chosen singing like birds in its branches and gathering its sweet fruits? These fruits are the Gifts of God but could also be seen as the merits of the elect, and as a symbol of the repose of the Saints in the arms of Christ." "Birds of the Trees of Life." (10, Jn.14.5-6) "The Way to the Invisible." Jesus says, "I am the Way...." "This is the path we must follow throughout life, arriving at the end only at the hour of death....The way is long, the climb is hard. Christ alone can illuminate this barren, stony path, which leads to Peace on the summit of the mountain of light." (11, Rev.21.23, 22.4-5) "Christ, Light of Paradise." "This is the arrival, Bliss, Paradise, the Light which is Christ and which shines through all Eternity." "Abide in Love," the fifth piece, is "a hymn to divine Love....This final movement is the outcome of the whole of Life. The page is turned, the earth already far, time is no more: it is a continuous present of never-ending bliss--the infinite Love of Christ in the soul contemplating Him."....Mrs. M., Yvonne Loriod-, throughout her exposition adds technical musical comments showing how words & music reinforce each other.

So my second affirmation is that "the next world will fit our eyes of faith," & I've illustrated this with a rather extended representation of a great, thoroughly biblical-Christian, symphony marrying the powers of eye & ear. I hope you catch it on PBS: you are both an eye artist & a lover of music, & it will feed your soul. Meanwhile, try praying the scriptures I've included in the above ¶, from Mrs. M.'s text.

3 **Life before & after death is a moral continuum.** Just above-behind my wordprocessor as I write is a 4,600-year-old statue of an afterlife deity, Osiris. We Christians have no afterlife deity: we have only one God, Lord of life-death-afterlife, whose character as holy love judges us, forgiving the penitent & giving up on the inveterate impenitent.

M., in his life & in this symphony was joyfully secure in both elements of this affirmation, viz (1) that God was/is/will be the Center & (2) that conformity to or rebellion against God's centrality & character as Holy Good determines our afterdeath destiny. In that deathbed letter to Mehta which Mehta read to us, M. said "I will regret [during purification, before the beatific Vision] all the bad I have done and rejoice in all the good, and then I will be given to understand the Invisible."

But neither of these elements is in **New Age** philosophy & praxis, including the scores of books on "life after life" experiences. The Washington (DC) Phillips Museun has a vanGogh titled "Hunting for God in Natural Things," a rural landscape. New Age's picture could be titled "Hunting Down God, and Eliminating Him, from All Things." (By "God" I mean what these God-haters mean, viz the biblical God.) Michael Medved (of "Sneak Previews") has elaborately documented the God-excising efforts of the New Age subculture, especially as it's been controlling the film/entertainment industry (eg, his HOLLYWOOD VS. AMERICA [Zondervan/92] & "Hollywood's Poison Factory..." [IMPRIMIS, Nov/92]). For biblical religion, Jewish & Christian, God is the primary subject on both sides of human death--but he's no subject at all, or even an object, to New Age's transcendentalized narcissism, its infantile fixation on what's happening / going to happen to me-me. ....INSTANCE: The current OMNI (324 W.Wendover Av., Suite 205, Greensboro, NC 27408) "Visions of the Afterdeath: An Exclusive OMNI Survey." In response to everybody's "What becomes of me after I die?" "every culture...has had an afterdeath system." So far, round the world, they've gathered 500 images for their Death & Dying II Project library....New Age has so skewed the American-cohort polling process that the "eight grids" are **Bible-blind.** One gathers that no leaders of biblical religion are in the survey: past batteries of questions have been answered by "healers, shamans, kings, diviners, peasants, & professionals [in what?]." Let's have a look at the grids: (1) "What's the Afterdeath All About?" Of course God is in none of the questions: the afterdeath is not about God at all. (2) "Who Tells You About the Afterdeath?" Here "church" was unavoidable as a possible source, along with parents & society. (3) "How Do You Prepare for the Afterdeath?" The Bible's answer, in a word, is repentance; but since New Age's view of life after death is pollyanna-amoral (nothing bad happens to anybody no matter their earthly life: the afterdeath is good news for everybody), repentance is alien to the paradigm. (4) "Defining the Afterdeath." No suggestion that any sacred scriptures might be of any help. (5) "Lay of the Land." Will we face any evil? Will the environment have "a hierarchical structure"? Any animals? "Check which of the following are present" (not on the list: God, Jesus Christ, angels). (6) "Talk About the Traveler [the deceased]--If You Can." (7) "Proving the Afterdeath Exists." Here one of the options is "Is the evidence in written form?" If I know the New Age mind, what's being fished for here is automatic writing & verbal channeling, such as in the Seth books or A Course in Miracles. (8) "The Return Trip." No moral content to any of the list of possibilities. Every one of the 13 questions is, viewed from within the biblical paradigm (the biblical way of seeing, & living in, the world), weird.

My reason for going into some detail on my affirmation No.3 is my knowing that you've had considerable exposure to New Age & have asked me about it, though not vis-a-vis death.

4 **As this world fits us as animals, God intends the next to fit us as spirits.** ("Intends" is crucial: God doesn't always get what he wants, for he's given us freedom to love or reject him & others.) One truth is, as Freud indelicately put it (CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS, p.30), we are "born between urine and feces," animals with no more dignity than the other animals have. The polar truth is that our "nature" (however you define it) includes an unquenchable refusal to be satisfied with our animal grasp, what fits us as animals in this world. "A man's reach," as Browning's oft-quoted, "must exceed his grasp / Or what's a heaven for?" As our animal body becomes, because of age &/or disease, less responsive to our will, our consciousness of its spacetime limits increases even if the demands of our spirit do not increase but are only "renewed day by day" (2Cor.4.16, as "our

outer nature is wasting away"). It isn't that heaven is a late-life compensatory creation, a wish-fulfillment dream: it's that when the tide has gone out, we can (& Loree & I often do) walk on the sandstrip between low- & high-tide.

But our warfare against bodily limits begins very early, even by age three (with the dawning consciousness of death), some pedopsychologists are saying. I could check it out in my prepubescent diaries, but some early poems (terrible doggerel!) show it. Eg, the spring after I'd just turned 20, I committed this crime against literature ("Slaves of Time"): Last fall I glimpsed from my window / A sunflower bright & gay. / I mused, "You are not for tomorrow; / You are made just for today." // This morn I sat by that window. / (The winter has come & passed.) / I looked from my book for a moment / At the bright, green grass. // A robin caught my attention,-- / Then an upright, but broken stalk. / "It's all that is left," I realized, / "Of that sunflower by the walk." // The robin first I saw,--- / Not the gaunt, crushed reed. / But glorious more than the robin / Was that sunflower filled with seed. // "They are slaves of time," I thought. / "The robin as well as the flower. / But is it true also of man? / Is he but for an hour?" // "Am I a slave of Time?" / The mighty Christ replies,/"Death's swallowed up in victory; / You'll meet Me in the skies." // Then, while this life shall last, / To HIM I'll give the praise. / And, when this life is past, / Wake---to an endless Day." The simple notes of spacetime transcendence are in the twin metaphors "skies" (space) & "endless" (time). Metaphors: can't take them literally. Literally, I prefer earth to sky; & who'd want an interminable day? But while the spiritual realities are inconceivable, ie beyond our mind's grasp, the direction of our reach is clear to us. "Sky" is hopes unrealized (as in the word "skypilot" & the question "What do you want, the sky?"--cp. "saved by hope" [Ro.8.24]); & "endless Day" signals the fullness of which our earthly happinesses are harbingers....Those two underlined words appear under "Heaven" in the just-published (first since 1566!) RC Universal Catechism: "the ultimate end and the realization of the deepest hopes of man, the state of supreme and definitive happiness."

CAUTION: The Bible will not tolerate the body/soul dualism the West picked up from the East (especially Hinduism) long before the Christian era. A human being, as a creature of God, is a single entity visible where it's thick ("body") & invisible where it's thin ("spirit"). While metempsychosis-reincarnation is a picture appropriate to dualism (& taken as true among New Agers), resurrection is the picture appropriate to biblical anthropology. (Jesus was not reincarnated but had his own body back in a transcendent mode. As he's now with his believers as "Spirit" ["the Lord is the Spirit," 2Cor.3.17 NIV,NRSV], I use "spirit" rather than "soul" to speak of our human animal-unfulfillable dimension.)

5 **"The world and the desire for it are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever"** (1Jn.2.17 NRSVmg;txt "its desires"). Three senses in which the first clause is true: (1) *personal*: the illusions of worldly permanence drop away from us as the years roll; & if enough of them roll, we experience an ever-decreasing power/desire to see the world as our oyster; (2) *cosmic*: "here we have no lasting city" (Heb.13.14 NRSV), not even a lasting earth ("Doomsday Science" blares the 23 Nov 92 NEWSWEEK cover: nuclear war is improbable, but a new ice age cometh if some orbiting mass doesn't end us before then: besides being fragile, our species is terminal: "It is never too soon to start worrying" [p.61]); (3) *cultural*: when successful, capitalism moves a society from self-denial (delayed gratification of self & the common life) to self-aggrandizement (eg, post-WWII America, especially the Reagan era of greed), late capitalism's downside includes severe maldistribution of wealth, & the law of diminishing returns vis-a-vis pleasure, leisure, consumerism, & narcissism (excessive self-focus), with debilitating accumulations of financial debt.

The second clause speaks to the quest for other meaning-&-security when, in late capitalism, the person in any class is overwhelmed by self-&-society-disappointment. As early as 1981, Dan. Yankelovich captured this mood in NEW RULES: SEACHING FOR SELF-FULFILLMENT IN A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN (Random House). It's a shift from the world is my oyster to being an oyster in the world--as self-contained, cocooned, as possible--socially uncommitted but expecting the

society to provide supportive rights, goods, & services....The upside of this super-individualization is the rising search for **spirituality** (as distinguished from religion, though religion is getting somewhat more attention than in the economic-boom period just passed). How does this speak to the afterlife (or "afterdeath," as some now are calling it)? Death ends time for us, but spirituality either extends time beyond death (as "forever," in the Bible verse that constitutes this fourth affirmation of mine) or transcends it (as in "eternal life" in the NT's Johannine literature: faith as an event moves one immediately from death, for the believer "has eternal life, and...has passed from death to life": Jn.5.24; 1Jn.3.14: "We know that we have passed from death to life"; & "the Eternal" is a good translation of God's name, YHWH)....But there's a price to be paid. It's attention to God's word, attending with the intention of obedience (an Eng. wd. whose Lat. root means "toward-hearing," ie turning to listen with the intent of hearkening, minding, obeying). For the energy, the dynamic, communicated through God's word is his will.

6 **"All the way my Savior leads me,** / What have I to ask beside? / Can I doubt his tender mercy / who through life has been my guide?" Yes, a hymn, a hymn I often find singing itself inside me. A tour guide leads you to a palace door, but only a palace guide can lead you inside; but Jesus is the Christian's guide both on this & on that side of biodeath, "all the way." In this affirmation, "what I believe about beyond death" (the title of this letter-Thinksheet) is the same as what I believe about before death, viz that Jesus is my central lover-teacher-guide. This is the bhakti (Skr. "love-devotion") mode of Christianity, & it fits my spirit better than do the other modes (jnana-knowledge, karma-action). It's fed by Scripture, hymns, public worship, & word-&-deed witness to Jesus in church & world.

Path & journey are the metaphors within which the guide-idea functions. We travel mapless through & beyond the world & are ever in need of guidance, as (in the Apocrypha) Tobit was of his guardian angel (on which see Jesus' saying, Mt.10.18: the human dignity of transcendentalized politics: everybody has a personal angel who reports in directly to God). Angels: glorified birds, or are birds demoted angels? Analogically, angels get their wings from birds, which are metaphors of the spiritual world & of intermediation. Remenber? you & I once led worship in a Unitarian-Universalist church, using the theme of angels (which UUs believe in, on a scale of 1 to 10, at about level .5). You did the visuals, including some of your own art (& some slides of mine on angels in Jewish & Christian art), & I did the verbal....As Mortimer Adler showed in "Angels," the first of the 101 "Great Ideas" in the SYNTOPICON, the angels are to our spiritual nature as the animals are to our physical nature. They are God-sent companions & guides &, as such, sort of amphibians, breathing heavenly & earthly air, as it were.

How does all this on angels relate to my fifth affirmation? Jesus, my guide, is amphibian (as creeds have it, "truly human, truly divine"). He was his first disciples' guide, then sent the Spirit to be our guide till his return (Jn.16.15: "he will take what is mine and declare it to you" [NRSV])....The functional correlation is simple: body:animal::spirit:angels-Spirit.

7 **Celebrative joy is the tonic, the dominant tone, of heaven.** A triumphal procession (2Cor.2.14, Col.2.15) leads the orant, the praising-praying believer, into the heavenly banquet (eating together being the sign & celebration of communion, especially among Semitic peoples). Jesus was accused of being a party-goer & was guilty, as we can see in the three parties thrown after three losts were found (L.15:6&9 ["Let's celebrate!"], 23 ["Let's celebrate with a feast!"]).

The domestic image of the celebrative feast is clear enough, but why the military image of the triumphal procession? Because Jesus, as Christus Victor, has, in his cross & resurrection, won the battle against death & its causes, viz the Evil One & sin. Christianity accepts death within the present fallen condition of creation, but defies death as "the last enemy" of God's desire....The alternatives? (1) Accept death as natural. We die like dogs & that's it; nobody survives hisr skin. While this materialism may be good for humility (fellow-creaturehood), it neglects the intuition & evidence that spirit is more than mind & mind is more than brain, & it makes the strivings & products of the human spirit mere epiphenomena

of our particular animal species. (2) Ignore, as unanswerable, the question of personal survival of death. This agnostic position is sometimes combined with the desire to "leave a name" (the immortality of influence) after "making one's mark." (3) Defy death and pride oneself in the noble courage of the defiance (as some ancient Stoic suicides, & Camus). (4) Attack death in hope of medical victory over it. This combines biblical, promethean, & faustian elements. The biblical element is that the enemy has already been defeated (1Cor.15) & we are to participate both passively & actively in that defeat. But the nonbiblical elements dominate, leading to overexpectations from self-manipulative processes (eg, Simonton & Siegel) & surgery & to "heroic means" to keep the organism alive at whatever costs to the person & to society. (5) Affirm death as the gate into a larger life for everybody: a happy immortality is a given, as the Evil One said to Eve (Gn.3.4, "you will not die"--which would have been true only if Eve had eaten from "the tree of life" [vs.23], Eden's other forbidden food-source). This view sacrifices morality to benevolence, but don't knock the benevolent heart of universalism. (6) Preach death as the eternal divider: "Go to hell or heaven, & stay there forever." This destiny-picture is the ultimate in ethical seriousness. It's part of the eschatological-apocalytic furniture Jesus uses (eg, in L.16.19-31, #2582 [a recent sermon of mine on this passage]), though--in light of our whole picture of him--I cannot believe he intended the story to be taken literally: to shock, he often used hyperbole. (7) Recognize that as free agents, some human beings prefer darkness to light &, in moving away from light, move away from life. This was the commonest early Christian view of afterdeath, & it's the ultimate in religious seriousness. This, conditional immortality (that only the Light-lovers survive), died out when after Augustine most Christians adopted the pagan Greek dualistic view that everybody's "soul" is immortal. Unfortunately (in my view), this locked the church into a literal reading of the position described just before this one, viz eternalism.

8 **If you have to get to heaven, you won't.** Christian self-denial (Mt.16.24, M.8.34, L.9.23) for the sake of Christ, the church, & the world stands over against the question "What's going to happen to me after my death?" That's not the only question I'm addressing in this letter-Thinksheet, but it's the central stimulus to human curiosity about the afterdeath. Reinhold Niebuhr is matter-of-fact in stating the narcissism Jesus was confronting in his call to self-denial (MAN'S NATURE AND HIS COMMUNITIES [Scrib/75], pp.30ff): "Human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses, and...the former is stronger than the latter. This assumption is the basis of Christian realism." The current secular ethic, which is gospel in our public schools, inflates those self-regarding impulses & gives them the virtue-name of "self-esteem." Besides ratifying America's excessive individualism, this spills over into group self-regarding impulses, now being signaled by the word "multiculturalism." Yesterday I heard a 17-year-old black girl asked, in the light of Spike Lee's film on Malcolm X, which was a greater hero to her, M.X or Martin Luther King, Jr. The former, she said, "for he helped us be proud of our race."

Niebuhr was right about original sin: playing up to the human downside is easier even though only the upside can save us. If you have to get to heaven, you won't.

9 **The moral view of life after death** (ie, that how we've lived here will make a difference to us there) & **the moral view of life before death** (ie, that we are responsible-accountable for the quality of our here-&-now decisions & followthroughs) **are reciprocal, each reinforcing the other.** I could cite masses of research backing up this affirmation historically: ethics & eschatology are twins, each weakened by the weakening or death of the other. (In #2310, I spell out both what happens when belief in a moral afterlife dies & the steps in helping youth (re)acquire it, reracinate themselves in this root of our spiritual heritage.)....Instead of quoting Bible, I'll adduce this from the Qur'an (58.20ff): "You won't find any who believe in God and the Last Day who are loving to anyone who opposes God and His Messenger." Faith in God assumes-implies belief in a moral afterlife: that's one interlock. The other is God-Muhammad: you can't believe in one without the other, & (opposite of Jesus' love-your-enemies) you mustn't love anyone who believes in neither or only in the first.

10 **God-busy here, God-busy there.** Anywhere-anytime, God should be the Center of human subjective & objective human activity, both by the logic that the Source & Destiny should be the Center & by the sense that human life derives from, & is sustained by, the divine Love.

Busy doing what over on the other side? Playing harps? That would be hell, not heaven, for music-haters, those without music appreciation. (Music is so much a part of Christianity that Christians undeveloped in music should work on it before they die: they'll get even more of it there than they do here. The Book of Revelation floats on a sea of singing in this world & the next, & singing is the central thing in the earliest pagan reference to Christian worship [Pliny to Trajan: "They come together on Sundays and sing hymns to Christ as to a god."].)

How about just being *not* busy after world-weariness, like God on the first Shabbat after six days of strenuous creating? How human: in labor we look forward to leisure, & vice versa. For early Christianity's detailed development of the rest metaphor, read the Letter (Epistle) to the Hebrews. God supplies our needs, says the Bible. Heaven is that truth heightened. When we need work, the work will be there; time-off, we'll have time off.

But what will the work be? A continuation & continuum of (to use three rich Hebrew words) *tehillah* (praise, hymn of praise, "the Psalms"), *tephillah* (praise), *avodah* (service, work)--all in the spirit of *todah* (thanksgiving, with no gratitude for God's impersonal competition, "a which that walks like a who" [e.e.cummings' "Thanksgiving (1956)"]; Meister Eckhart: "'Thank you' is enough to say to God").

While I resist speaking of the richness of the other words, I must say more about *avodah*, whose domain is free service, service as a slave, labor, worship (as performance of acts of sacrifice & devotion), crop cultivation (with special reference to tilling), business. Two notes showing the closeness of praise & service: (1) "Praise our God, all his servants" (Rev.19.5), & (2) the pleonastic phrase, "service of worship" (instead of just "the worship" or "the service")....The NT's Greek parallel stems are *diakon-* (whence "deacon," servant), *doul-* (slave), & *latr-* (duties connected with worship, rites; in NT, noun Heb.9.1). ...What's the sentence that most often comes to mind when I think of the afterlife as a sphere of action? It's this, which I'll boldface because I almost used it as the lead for my ninth affirmation: **"His servants shall serve him"** (Rev.22.3 KJV; NRSV, "...will worship him" [fn.: Gk "slaves" instead of "servants"]; the vb. stem is *latr-*, to engage in worship appropriate to the templeless [21.22] city, Augustine's "civitas celestia" [heavenly city] replacing corrupt "Babylon" [chap.18], "civitas terrena": we are to be the Levites, so serving God in the city that the city itself functions as the alternative temple of the "new heaven and new earth" [21.1]).

Yep, I got a bit technical-biblical. But the above is the best way I can make this affirmation: to invite you to suck on, & pray over, the biblical metaphors for what we'll be doing in the afterlife--when we're not resting, of course. The constant in it all is that God in Jesus "the [slain-risen] Lamb" in the Spirit is on "the throne," ie is the Center--& our importance, our worth, our dignity, our self-respect is derivative from our behavior insofar as it reflects that fact (as is true also, for eyes of faith, of this present life in the animals we walk around in & as)... ...But Jn. the Revelator, who "heard [auditions] and saw [visions] these things" (22.8), writes it all down in the prayerful hope that it'll make a difference in how his readers-hearers behave here & now, in our oh-so imperfect "earthly city" ("civitas terrena"), which we are to "seek the shalom of" (Jer.29.7), praying for & working toward greater political-economic-social justice. True, the Revelator is not as hopeful as was Jeremiah, who was encouraging Jews who'd been dragged to old Babylon. Jn. was a political exile from the new Babylon, his name for Rome, which had reduced his rights to life & writing. Christians were being reduced to the narrowest freedom, the God-given right to witness (Gk. *martyr-*) at the cost of their lives, so (2.10) "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." It is a good word for you, my dear_____, as you are challenged to witness to God's love & your abiding hope while your animal life narrows down. As for that anticipated "crown," it's not only the victor's wreath but also the symbol of authority in responsibility, for we shall "reign with him" "forever and ever"

(Rev.22.5; cp. 5.10 & 20.6; another section of our afterlife job-description).

So pervasive of Scripture is the theme of divine service that thousands of hymns have centered on it. At 3 a.m. today I awoke with one of them singing itself in me: "O Jesus, I have promised / To serve thee to the end. / Be thou forever near me, / My master and my friend. / I shall not fear the battle / If thou be by my side, / Nor wander from the pathway/ If thou wilt be my guide." I fell back into sleep, & when I awoke another service-theme hymn was singing in me: "Ye servants of God, your master proclaim, / And publish abroad his wonderful name! / [3rd stanza] The praises of Jesus the angels proclaim, / Fall down on their faces and worship the Lamb" [Rev.5 et al]....I have memorized very few hymns. They come to me from much hymn-singing & hymn-meditating, major aspects of my spiritual formation yesterday & today. But the deliberate memorizing of your favorite hymns would be, I believe, a profitable spiritual exercise for you. STORY: An octogenarian former schoolmate of mine laughs about having memorized the whole hymnal unnecessarily. He'd been medically convinced he was going blind, so he introjected the hymnal! But he can still read well, even my Thinksheets. And of course is glad & thankful for all that hymn-singing going on inside him during his long siege of congestive heart failure....As you sometimes heard me say in teaching & preaching, what gets your attention gets you. Spiritually as well as materially, we are what we eat. And the great hymns are high-quality cuisine for the spirit.

11 **Love has the will & the power to let no good be lost.** Death is not powerful enough to intimidate love (Song of Songs 8.6-7). Love as verb (action) & noun (relation) is the central continuity between the worlds. So, as a sprightly hymn puts it, "Awake, awake, to love and work, / The lark is in the sky!" By taking Kierkegaard seriously, & by his own psychoanalytic practice & research, Otto Rank, Freud's closest collaborator, rejected the master's negativism about religion, which O.R. concluded "is inherent in human nature and its fulfillment is basic to any kind of social life" (BEYOND PSYCHOLOGY, Dover/41, p.194; qtd. in Ernest Becker, THE DENIAL OF DEATH, Free Press/73/75, p.174, where E.B. expounds O.R.'s view of religion as "the furthest reach of the self, the highest idealization man can achieve. It represents the fulfillment of the Agape love-expansion....only by surrendering...can man conquer death....[next p.] Man is a 'theological being,' concludes Rank, and not a biological one." A psychoanalyst sounding like Augustine, Kierkegaard, Tillich! "Such a mixture of intensive clinical insight and pure Christian ideology is absolutely heady.")

Half my lifetime ago I wrote this as part of a hymn: "For nothing known is ever lost, / Economy divine; / God purchased man at awful cost, / The Cross is now the sign." Long since, I changed from knowledge to the good: "For nothing *good* is ever lost." But as all good derives from the divine benevolence ("God is Love," as 1Jn. twice puts it [4.8&16]), of late I've inclined to "Nothing loving [expressive of love] is ever lost"--but also I back away from this for fear of sentimentality, as "love" in our present culture is so polluted with narcissism. And another caution against overreading affirmation #10 is the painful observation that in the human heart, in human relations, in history, unlove often gets the upper hand over love & appears to undo it, to defeat it, to rub it out. But, I think, the mystery of evil is weaker than the mystery of good: how can we not the more believe in God, seeing that sooner or later love rights itself & sails on, dies but is resurrected? That is my response to those who say, How can you believe in God, seeing there's so much evil & death in the world?

Life is love paying attention, & life does not cease as long as love pays attention, & God's love does not cease paying attention. On our side, we last as long as what we attend to lasts; & if what we pay attention to is everlasting, so are we. Only the biblical God can be called "the Eternal" (YHWH, Yahweh), "the Everlasting," the only One who can tell us, & has told us, what/who Love is: Albert Schweitzer often sang, "Jesus loves me, this I know,...."

But love cut off from the root of religion collapses into narcissism, which ironically makes love--eg, marriage--impossible. Impossible also belief in this tenth affirmation unless one practices the Presence. "The hunger for assurance about the reality and friendliness of the Unseen is the explanation of the strange custom

of going to church" (Fosdick, TTC, p.60). O.W.Holmes: "In the corner of my heart is a plant called reverence which needs watering about once a week."

12 **Beyond death lies mystery continued.** This affirmation denies that here-&-now is profoundly known, so dying is facing mystery as new experience. The truth is that life here-&-now is, for the reflective person, a profound mystery; & the afterlife will be mystery II, a continuation of the mystery of life. Kierkegaard, greatest psychologist since Augustine, could say (Journal 12 May 1839) "All is entirely unintelligible to me, and particularly my own person." The more reverently & humbly reflective we've been, the less will death be a shock. Less a shock, too--& this is this truth's other side--if in our aging this manner of inner being increases: "The Soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed / Let's in new light through chinks that time has made" (Edwund Waller, Eng. poet).

13 **Jesus' resurrection is the foretaste & model of the new creation** (1Cor.15, 2Cor.4.16-5.18). I'm not at all disturbed by the Bible's various pictures of the future thisworldly & nextworldly. One group of them draws from the historical conviction that God's purposes for earth will not be finally frustrated, & the other centers in innerlife experience. Some passages are collages of the two types of picture! Why not? It has verismo: we are a bodysoul, soulbody mystery, an angel growing bigger in an animal getting smaller (my scientific explanation of why pain increases as we age). And by remaining open to the mystery here, we guard against the arrogance of denying the reality of the mystery there.

But that arrogance is rife in our society. In the current (Dec/92) CABLE GUIDE, Carl Sagan, of "Cosmos," says that God is merely "the sum of the physical laws of the universe" (in the feature article, "God and TV"). To support his materialism, he wrongly adduces Spinoza & Einstein. Such thinkers have not made an advance beyond the Enlightenment's overconfidence in reason. I'm certainly not antireason. I like this from Branch Rickey: You're a slave if you daren't reason, a fool if you can't, & a bigot if you won't.

But science & faith both depend on openness to the unexpected; & it's unscientific as well as irreligious to foreclose, in the name of reason, against radical possibilities. Ruling out providence as an explanatory principle, Voltaire, the Enlightenment's genius, settled for a merely rational protection against life's evils & uncertainties (as in, eg, CANDIDE [1759]). There's a spiritual & imaginal deadliness to the dominance of reason, which says (eg) "Dead people stay dead, so Jesus did not survive death, so there's nothing to the root of the Christian religion." Science is gradually recovering from dogmatic materialism, but is making less progress in breaking out of the prison of exclusive reason.

14 **The One we are to meet there is the One who asks us to follow him here**: the afterlife is a motivator to faithful service of Christ here. "O Jesus, thou hast promised / To all who follow thee / That where thou art in glory / There shall thy servant be; / And, Jesus, I have promised / To serve thee to the end; / O give me grace to follow, / My master and my friend" (3rd stanza of a hymn whose 1st appears in §9). The Christian view of the afterlife centers not in us or our beloved deceased but in Jesus, who waits to welcome us. This morning Loree & I sang a hymn by Fanny Crosby who, born blind, said that the face of Jesus would be the first sight she would ever have. Of course not all Christians are blessed with this warm, evangelical piety; but it is available to all.

15 Coram deo (face to face with God), **tragedy doesn't have the last word.** Facing his tragic death, Jesus (like Linus) says "Why me?" (quoting Ps.22.1: Mt.27.46, M.15.34); but his last word bespeaks his lifelong preoccupation with God (L.23.46). Paradox: Jesus becomes "the hope of [our participation in] glory" (Col.1.27) because "God did not spare his own Son" (Ro.8.32); & if he did not--oh, the toughmindedness of Christian faith!--how much smaller a matter it is that he not protect you against ALS or me against at least partial blindness! Or even that there should have been, & continue to be, shocking tragedies in nature & in human affairs. "God is love," yes; but the mystery of evil is as dark as the mystery of good is bright. Not knowledge, then, but trust is the issue. My choice has been clear to me since my midteens: "Your words give eternal life" (Jn.6.68 CEV)....More generally (Becker, op.cit., p.203f), "religion solves the problem of death...[&] dignity....religion alone gives hope," makes "a mockery of earthly logic...relieves the absurdity of earthly life....takes one's very creatureliness, one's insignificance, and makes it a condition of hope."

16 **The Love that will not let us down will not let us go.** I find this said in many ways in hymns I wrote more than a half century ago. As a small child I learned to walk into my parents arms; & I will be as eager at life's end to walk into the arms of God, to return to the beginning &, as T.S.Eliot put it, "know it for the first time."....I'm frustrated! Scores of notes I can't share with you if I'm to mail this letter for only 29¢! But I hope some of the things I have managed to put down will catch fire for you as you mull them over (time & again, I hope)....You asked about determining your time of death. Yes*, I'd say, when your body has become so poor a servant of your spirit as to be unable any longer to care for its own needs & its proper share in the needs of your spirit.

* By fasting.

Grace & peace, Lee Miller

2590.11

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3 Dec 92

MARJORIE MICHAEL

Dear Marj,

Sorry I didn't understand earlier that you wanted me to write to you my understanding of the afterlife. As you can see, I did it in the form of an open-letter Thinksheet (#2590), but now I must add a more personal note.

I have a vague memory of telling you, maybe in class, of hearing Viktor Frankl tell of a young artist who contracted ALS or some similarly progressively confining disease & soon could no longer paint. But he continued having his students come, for he'd not lost his ability to appreciate & communicate his art appreciation. Then he went blind. Did the students stop coming? No, they came to experience his ultimate work of art--himself. Three stages: create, appreciate, decide what attitude you'll take to what's happening to you. Frankl's point: the power to decide, & therefore personal responsibility, is never taken entirely away from us. We continue, no matter what the condition of our body, to be responsible & accountable to God. And (I add) this includes the decision whether/when to stop eating (passive suicide: I'm less comfortable with active methods of suicide, though I'd not be judgmental against anyone who, in the extremity of bodily existence, were to choose such)....A brotherinlaw of mine is going to start chemo for his metastisized cancer. When yesterday I mentioned this to a highly respected Christian leader, he quickly said "I'd want no treatment for metastatic cancer, only pain control."....I hope you've given Gerry power of attorney & signed under your specific wishes. It's so easy to put off final business. God be with you in all these tough decisions.

The bust you did of me is in my study, & now I never notice it without thanking God for your life & praying for you & Gerry. Many a visitor has said "It seems alive!" It is alive at least with your love & art. Now your art must be transposed to the invisible hands of your spirit. Please try using the enclosure titled "Resting With God in Centering Prayer." You & Gerry both need to let God give you inner strength, peace, & joy through regular spiritual discipline, including the reading of great passages of Scripture & the great hymns.

As for #2590, it's long & not easy! I suggest that Gerry read it to you in small bites, one section at the time. Then you may want to study the section alone. If you go through the whole thing fast, please try to go back & do it slow, one section at the time. At least, that's what I had in mind for you in writing it the way I did.

Love, grace, & peace, Bill

Jerry & Melissa Michael
Cedar Rd.
Katonah NY 10536
17 Apr 93

2590.12

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Thank you, Melissa, for phoning me the sad/glad news; & you, Jerry, for coming on the line.

You both know, especially Jerry, that Marge had a distinct & valued place in our hearts. We will often remember her before the altar of God, & regret we cannot be at the formal service of memory.

We'll remember her pluck in going West to photo-grab those umbrellas....&, much more, her warm heart & her eager mind ever probing for more light. "More light"! It's in a phrase made famous by Pastor Robinson as he sent most of his congregation here on the Mayflower in 1620. (He wanted to come, but the congregation voted that he stay in Holland with those--the elderly, the "differently enabled"--who couldn't make the trip: congregationalism was radically democratic, & set the tone for the American way of doing political business.) Here is a recent Thinksheet (#2605) on the subject.

The way you put it, Melissa, was that your mother "redefined God as she went along." My response was "May we all always experience God more deeply & broadly!" What that means specifically for me you could surmise if you were to read the last thing I wrote for your mother, viz #2590, "What I Believe About Beyond Death." I am a freethinking evangelical.

Jerry, you said yesterday "She always referred to you as her mentor." That was not contradicted by her speaking up to me, as she did the last time I was with her.* Rather, speaking up to me confirms the way I've tried to be mentor, viz to encourage people to think-feel-decide for themselves. It's the style of my Thinksheets because it's been the style of my preaching-pastoring-teaching all my life.

As you know, I have in my study a visual invitation to pray for Marge & you all, viz the bust of me she insisted on doing after she'd had a few courses from me. When I see it, I'll not cease to pray for her: prayer, I believe, can reach around the world & even beyond it.

Grace & peace,

Willis

*
She said, pointing her finger at me, "You shouldn't judge a book till you've read it!" I replied that my N.Y.Seminary library work involves my making judgments about thousands of books annually, & nobody could read more than a few. The book in question was on Jesus, written by a non-Christian (really, anti-Christian) non-scholar who's set upon the task of justifying his humanism.