

"I WAS ONLY CLAY TILL ROSES WERE PLANTED IN ME"

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My single purpose in this Thinksheet is to lay this Persian saying on you, in the hope it'll do something to you, for you--or, to put it in a noncoercive way, in the hope you'll do something with, make something of it in your meditations.

As I was about to type this, my mail was brought to me, & from it I quote an eminent church historian: "I was enjoying your reflections" in #2596 "without a thought for utility, **but then....**" (Bf mine). Please, dear readers, read my Thinksheets like that! For enjoyment, but aiming at nothing in particular & the glory of God in general. If you're looking for something in particular, like an essay conclusion to wrap it all up, you'll be disappointed: the conclusion is in you. "In the meantime" (no period! That's the way W.H. Auden ends his wondrous Christmas poem, "Narrator").

Let the church historian continue: "but then...my own ruminations became a short doxology" as he suddenly saw an action connection with his own life. Ah, how we can trust the connections to appear when we have faithfully given shape to our souls by prayer & our minds by meditation!

1 "What was Maya Angelou's [presidential inaugural] poem all about?," somebody asked. My answer: "Nothing. Everything." I thought of a Fritz Kunkel lecture I taped in 1952: a down-to-earth, practical parent of prosaic disposition was trying to explain something to a small poetic offspring, who sat there "with big eyes staring off into nothing." Into fantasy. Into everything.

It's impossible to grow spiritually without the cultivation of poetic sensibility whether one's gift for it is high or low. I can prove everybody's got it. In a public meeting recently I began with this ~~quotation~~ then said nothing more till I'd looked into each of the faces. The soul behind each face was nuzzling, nibbling at, getting nourishment from this great one-line poem.

2 I hope you do your own nuzzling-nibbling, but I'll do a little, enough to make this a Thinksheet of respectable length.

3 The Bible's first work-image of God is as speaker (Gn.1.3, "God said"), then as maker (1.7; 1.1 is a subordinate clause [NRSV is correct here], "when God created"), then as potter (2.7 mg, "God formed a man of dust [clay] from the ground"; Jer.18 roots this in metaphorical meditation; the funereal "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" derives from many biblical passages, mainly in Job, but the 1st ref. is Gn.18.27)....Yes, clay. That Persian philosopher-gardner knew what he was talking about. "Roses do best in clay loam soil" (J.H. McFarland & Robt. Pyle, HOW TO GROW ROSES [Mac/68], p.54).

We were/are/will be clay, earth: "You were made from soil, and you will become soil again" (Gn.3.19 TEV). In ourselves, unshaped by the divine hands, were worthless. And in the light of the fact that our bodies don't hold their shape for long, we're transient. In Talmud, with its Jewish genius for putting legs on spirit, we are told to have in one pocket a card reading, "Behold, I am dust & ashes" (to be taken out & read whenever the thought occurs to you that you are God or at least a good angel); & in the opposite pocket a card reading, "For you the world was made" (to be taken out & read whenever you are tempted to think of yourself more lowly than you ought to think).

4 Roses. I grow them as worship offerings in the Craigville Tabernacle & as joy-spreaders for other occasions. They're tough to grow (as you can see: I have to read books about it). And their glory, like human physical beauty, is soon gone. But it is glory while it lasts! A servant spreading wilted roses before the Pope's path while saying "Sic transit gloria mundi" (Thus passes the world's glory) is dramatizing not just for the high & mighty but for us all that our long claims are folly & that in the long run we're all dead. Too, it teaches us diligence (Jn.5.17; 9.4 NRSV: "night is coming when no one can work").

5 God intends that we deserts "blossom like the rose" (oops, "crocus": Is.35.1 NRSV; oleander is the closest thing the Bible has to our rose) & that we be ever-blooming: by God's grace through our Lord Jesus Christ, eternal life can be planted in our clay.