

## HOSPICE AND THE RESURRECTION

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The title of this talk, "Hospice & the Resurrection," has in it a distressing word. It's not "Hospice": we all know about the Hospice movement & are comfortable with the word. We're comfortable also, though perhaps somewhat less so, with the expression "the Resurrection." That leaves the little word "and" to distress us.

Though Christian in origin, hospices are public **secular** institutions rightly forbidding employees, including chaplains, from proselytizing, that is, from seeking converts to one's religion (or "take" on life's meaning & destiny). But Christians under secular employ are not free to bracket off their Christian witness during work. Rather, we must live perpetually with the question "How, under the no-evangelizing stricture, am I to make my witness to the Good News of God's saving self-gift in Jesus Christ my Lord?"

The question, as you can understand, is especially loud in the heart & mind of the Christian hospice chaplain, who must live daily in the **tension** between the wide spiritual variety of hospice patients & the intense inner call to be faithful in the living out, always & everywhere, of Christian commitment, of the deed-&-word witness to "Jesus and the resurrection" (which, says Luke in Acts 17:18, is code for "the good news" Paul was pressing upon the Athenians).

Before making some pastoral-theological observations while telling six **stories**, I should say a few words about how God led me into hospice-chaplaincy work. I'll do this swiftly by alluding to four **events** in my soul's journey:

**Age 4:** Sitting in a tiny chair during Sunday school in the basement of a tiny Nebraska tiny-rural-village church, I learned to sing "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam" while the sun was streaming in through a tiny window. Metaphors are soul-food & mind-stimulants. In the subsequent 68 years--now you know how old I am--I've come to no clearer insight into what Jesus wants me for, though college & seminary helped me to a more elaborate articulation of it. Jesus still "wants me for a sunbeam, to shine for him each day"--& always will.

**Age 10:** Wisely, my parents did not deprive me of the experience of seeing my grandmother, a Christian woman, die. What frightened me was not her death but the grownups' telling me that she had entered into "eternal life," which my child-mind could only imagine as unlimited extension, no boundaries & therefore no safety, no security (the precise reverse of the biblical meaning of "eternal life"! ). Worry about my soul endlessly wandering in endless space led to my conversion & baptism. At home & in church I heard the good news of a blessed assurance that in Jesus' life, death, & resurrection, God had provided security, eternal security for my soul now & forever; & I was overwhelmed with the joy of experiencing the power of God's love for me, for me personally--& have been ever since.

**Age 24:** Our middle son died. One cannot know how one will take one's own death; but it is highly improbable that mine will be as inwardly painful as his was to me. Every little dying is meant to be preparation for the big one. But *some* dyings before one's own are not little. Stephen John's death was further preparation for my becoming a hospice chaplain.

**Age 53:** I had the primary care of my mother during most of her dying days. We die as we live, & she lived & died as sunshine for Jesus. In her last days, she was forever blessing all comers with great quotations from Scripture & hymnody. Of this, I especially remember her reciting to me most of Romans 8: sunbeams, securing, & nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (as the chapter ends). (My parents were both profoundly Christian. I have not mentioned my father's death, for it was sudden & half the continent away from where I was living at the time.)

It was while ministering to my dying mother that my **vocation** became clear to me. I was, somehow somewhere, to work with the dying. I had the appropriate gifts & was in my final year of New York Theological Seminary to develop those gifts. So, soon after we moved from New York to Cape Cod, I participated in the beginnings of Hospice of Cape Cod. Belief in the resurrecting power of God in Jesus Christ through

2 the Holy Spirit was then, & remains, at the heart of who I am & the motivating force in my pastoral care with the dying & their loved ones.

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From these past 15 years with Hospice of Cape Cod, I'd like to tell you a few **stories** that exhibit some of the joys, learnings, & perplexities in my striving to be faithful to my own Christian belief in what the creed calls "the resurrection of the body," as well as to be accepting & comforting to the dying & their families whatever their religious or spiritual orientation. And as we all know, facing death--more than any other life-experience--focuses attention on the meaning of life, on the ultimate questions. The innermost life, the deepest being of some people, comes open only when face-to-face with death, their own or that of a loved one. With fear & trembling, the minister to those facing death is aware of great good or harm in the offing, & of the need to be actively, indeed intensely, listening both to what is spoken & what is unspoken *de profundis* (the Vulgate's first words in Psalm 130 ["out of the depths"])). In active listening, I include such speech of mine as encourages the distressed to reveal those depths: the primary holy words for the conversation must come not from the minister but from the ministered unto--to which the chaplain will add appropriate words out of his or her own depths.

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Sufferers may or may not be conscious of two **questions** the chaplain must be conscious of. Their very being is asking both "Is this person [the chaplain] somebody I can trust to really hear me?" and "What else is there to life than what I've known, & is there anything on the other side of death?" At the very moment meaning leaks out for many when face-to-face with death, the person & office & presence of the chaplain says **yes** to the whole--to life, to suffering, & to death. What shape that "yes" takes is a function of the conversation under the brooding presence of the Holy Spirit, whose perpetual business is the New Creation.

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I'm skipping the nuts & bolts of hospice chaplaining; you know about that, though of course you're free to ask me any specific questions you may have. I should say, however, that the chaplain is chaplain also to the hospice **staff**, which in our case has been about 100. One aspect of this is that a Hospice of Cape Cod chaplain closes the bereavement section of each team (case-review) meeting on a spiritual note, including prayer & an appropriate reading (from Scripture, or something like this from Mother Teresa: "The fruit of silence is prayer. The fruit of prayer is faith. The fruit of faith is love. The fruit of love is service. The fruit of service is peace.")

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Now for those **stories & observations**--the names, of course, being pseudonyms. It would be well to bear in mind that the hospice chaplain seldom has opportunity for a long-term relationship with patients & their families, such as the pastor of a church has. Often it's a matter of only a few conversations (plus, perhaps, a funeral or memorial service)--indeed, sometimes only one conversation. There's some comfort in that the hospice chaplain is, timewise, in between the congregational pastor & the hospital chaplain. (Yes, rigorists insist that the phrase "pastoral care" should be limited to the work of the congregational pastor, not extended to institutional clergy such as hospice, hospital, & retirement-&-nursing-home facilities. To enter into this debate would not serve the purpose of this colloquy.)

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**Story #1:** Jane, age 45, had an intense fear of dying, losing her **bodyself**. She asked the RN to call me to come soon, though she'd had no membership, or even attendance, in any church for many years. Restless & agitated, she sensed that her lung cancer was about to do her in.

Arriving shortly after the nurse's phonecall, I, a stranger walking into her death-room, discovered that she had a vague anxiety rather than a nameable fear. Could I help, please?

In the conversation, she kept alluding to something that had happened to her **body** when she was in her youth: she had been baptized, a confessor's baptism (yes, as a Baptist). In that event, she found the comfort Luther, baptized as an infant, often felt as he cried out "I have been *baptized!*"

She died later that night--peacefully, her husband told me the next day.

3 What had I done? Something utterly simple, as must often be when a patient is so heavily sedated as to be almost incapable of rational thought. In a few words, I shared my faith in the power of God's love in Christ; then I prayed for God's grace--saying Psalm 23 & praying the Lord's Prayer. I kept holding her hand while she went to sleep.

The full ministry of the gospel includes both word & sacrament; but sometimes words--residual remembered words out of the long past--can have sacramental force. (We all need to be warned against the temptation to the shortcut of using words magically, instead of sacramentally.)

The take I want to make on this case is this: for us Christians, the continuous **bodiliness** of birth, baptism, eucharist, death, & resurrection. Jane's body was only a few hours from death, but her repeated reference was not to her corpse but to her baptized **body**.

I believe in the Hebrew-Jewish-Christian totality concept, that the self is a **unity** of body & soul (or spirit or mind). In line with this are the biblical accounts (with precedents in Ezekiel & Daniel) of the **bodily** risen Jesus, & the biblical promise (for example, in 1 Corinthians 15 & 2 Corinthians 4-5), in line with the vision of a new earth as well as a new heaven, that we Christians in the mystery of the resurrection will be like our Lord, with risen **bodies**.

This Christian affirmation of the **body** both here-now & then-there is continuous with what verse 31 of the Bible's first chapter says, namely, that the creation, including its physicality, is "very good." As it protected the early Christians from gnosticism, it protects us from falling for the denigration of the body & this world & this age, falling for New Agey illusions of the spirit split off from the body &--for example--"beamed up" to a spaceship behind Hale-Bopp or any other comet.

Time for a spot of humor on bodiliness:

I was asked to conduct the funeral of a man who requested that in the service, the poem "Lucky Mud" be read--& I can't resist reading it to you. It's adapted by Richard Trudeau from a passage in Kurt Vonnegut's CAT'S CRADLE. Here it is:

God made mud.  
God got lonesome.  
So God said to some of the mud,  
"Sit up,  
See all I've made:  
The hills, the sky, the stars, the sea."

And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around.  
Lucky me. Lucky mud.

I, mud, got to see what a nice job God had done.  
Nice going, God!

Nobody but you could have done it, God.  
I certainly couldn't have.  
I feel very unimportant compared to you.  
In fact the only time I feel the least bit important  
is when I think of all the mud  
that didn't even get to sit up and look around.  
I got so much and most mud got so little.  
Thank you for the honor.

Soon, mud lies down again and goes to sleep.  
What memories for mud to have.  
What interesting other kinds of sitting-up mud I met.  
Almost everything I saw I loved.  
Amen.

4 The Greek, gnostic, medieval, & modern body/soul **split** has lost the body for religion (which now for multitudes is only "spiritual" with the negative connotation of nonphysical) & for medicine (enthralled by materialism) has lost the soul. Both fragments have forgotten the biblical God. A further note here on traditional Western medicine:

God may be forgotten by **passive** amnesia (forgetting to remember him--which happens when religious praxis ceases, as for example dropping out of Sunday school or regular Sunday public worship), or by **active** amnesia. The latter, an aggressive suppression of God-talk, has especially characterized the medical & attendant professions. Till very recently, medical schools treated the human body as meat, flesh without spirit.

The Hospice movement, from its start by a deeply committed Christian physician, Dame Cicely Saunders of London, has corrected this medical aberration from the union of soul & body. From its very beginning, Hospice of Cape Cod has honored the spiritual dimension in its caring ministries for the dying & their loved ones.

On June 26, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled out the alleged right to assisted suicide. The next day, page one of the Cape's only daily newspaper quoted Mary McCarthy, founder & the present CEO of Hospice of Cape Cod, as suggesting that now attention should be shifted from assisted suicide to "helping people die in a more humane way." Said she, "There is so much we can do to manage physical pain. What goes along with that is financial pain, emotional pain, **spiritual pain**." As a believer in total care, & as a committed Christian, she has been enthusiastically supportive of me, & of subsequently added chaplains, in the development of our hospice pastoral care program.

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Does the Christian doctrine of the resurrection speak to all the problems surrounding death & dying? Yes, in many ways. Jesus' resurrection was the other side of his dying.

Facing his own death in a Nazi prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer continued his practice of viewing all culture, all life, in the light of the resurrection of his Lord. Unlike immortality, the idea that death permanently separates body as mortal & soul as immortal, the doctrine of resurrection takes seriously the bodysoul, soulbody **unity**, & thus the importance of the earthly as well as the heavenly. We Christians, said he, are not to rejoice in the collapse of culture, but to work & pray for its transformation, with the preservation of all that's good about it. Hear his words:

"It is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over, that one may believe in the resurrection and a new world." The Christian does not try to escape "from earthly tasks and into the eternal; but, like Christ himself..., he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ." "This world must not be prematurely written off."

As Mother Teresa looks on the dying with resurrection eyes, so should every Christian worker in hospices everywhere. Especially the *Christian* hospice chaplain should perpetually inwardly hear the Voice saying, "I am the resurrection and the life."

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You will be relieved to know that the remaining stories & observations are briefer.

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**Story #2:** George, age 74, also died of lung cancer. A lifelong faithful Episcopalian, he understood the unity of body & soul & of word & sacrament. Though he could no longer speak, he managed to get through to me (1) that he wanted me to read to him the prayer which daily through his long illness had brought him comfort, & (2) that (when I told him I was drinking cranberry juice) he wanted me to give him the eucharist. (His lips framed the word "wine"--from which his wife perceived that he wanted to take communion.) When I asked if he would like an Episcopal priest to officiate with me & use the words familiar & dear to him, he nodded yes. His wife mentioned a number of priests, & he chose a woman whom he knew as a hospice chaplain. His family--wife & two daughters--took communion with him. Almost immediately he slipped into a coma, & died the next day.

**Joy** in the resurrecting God was the tone of the memorial service, which I helped plan with the widow & her children. George's one hymn-request was the now familiar

"When in our music God is glorified, / and adoration leaves no room for pride, / It is as though the whole creation cried: 'Alleluia!'" After the eucharist, we sang "Lift high the cross, / the love of Christ proclaim / till all the world adore / his sacred name." The worship had been what every Christian funeral & memorial service should be, namely, a grateful-joyful foretaste of the resurrection in the new heaven & the new earth. One of the daughters, who had neglected Christian worship after marrying an agnostic, said to me after the service, "I can now sing the hymns again." And since then, she & her children have been faithful communicants in their local Episcopal church. As that second hymns ends, "So shall our song of triumph ever be / Praise to the Crucified for victory!"

Again I had experienced, with this family, what has long been a deepening truth for me: Life's richest meaning & deepest joy come from confidence in God through the gospel Word & Sacrament, & the life to which it leads & which it feeds.

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**Story #3:** Edith, age 76, moved to Cape Cod to spend her dying days with her son. He worked during the day, & her sister cared for her during his worktime. (While I visit the dying in nursing homes, most people die either at home or in hospital.)

As often happens, I was called in at the last minute--in this case, after the last minute: when I arrived the patient was already comatose.

Quickly I learned that she had been a longtime faithful Lutheran, whose Christian faith included the resurrection hope.

As I read to her scriptures she doubtless knew--Psalm 23 & Romans 8--her tense arms, high over her head on her hospital bed, relaxed, & she folded them quietly on her chest. As I closed with the Lord's Prayer & a prayer of blessing, her agitation, which had continued throughout the day, completely ceased. Amazed, her sister said, "To think I was only thinking of *physical* distress & need!"

Next morning, Edith died peacefully.

On visits, I always have with me the Bible, great quotations appropriate to dying-death-afterlife, prayerbooks, & my boombox with a fairly wide selection of tapes I can play (or loan) as appropriate.

Edith's family had seen her, when comatose, draw on her inner resources to **walk into the arms of God**. On this metaphor, here is a quotation I sometimes read &, If the patient/family wishes, leave a copy of. The source is Thomas Aquinas, recomposed by my husband:

*The road  
that stretches before our feet  
is a challenge to our hearts  
long before it tests the strength of our legs.  
Our destiny  
is to run to the edge of the world and beyond,  
off into the darkness:  
sure in spite of all our blindness,  
secure in spite of all our helplessness,  
strong in spite of all our weakness,  
joyfully in love in spite of all  
the pressures on our hearts.  
In that darkness beyond the world  
we can begin to know the world and ourselves —  
and to understand  
that we were not made to pace out our lives behind prison walls  
but to walk into the arms of God.*

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**Story #4:** Peter, age 86, had been a scientist & described himself as "not a religious man." However, he obviously appreciated my reading of Scripture & my praying, ending with "I pray in Jesus' name." (Only when praying with fellow-Christians do I use the ancient conclusion "In Jesus' name"--for that assumes "We pray in Jesus'



name"--a statement inapplicable in Peter's case. When I conclude "I pray in Jesus' name," the praying is generic for nonChristians present & specific-Christian for me & other Christians present. But am I not free to pray generically, as if addressing a deity "To whom it may concern"? I think not: Christian commitment, as I understand it, rules that out.)

On my second visit, Peter--who had been a very vigorous man & now was rapidly declining--wanted to discuss **eternal life**. Faced with the ultimate human limitation, he ~~was~~ willing to consider God's limitlessness. What scriptures would you have read then? I read the story of Nicodemus' questioning of Jesus (John 3), then in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 Paul's reason for never losing heart: when outwardly we are "wasting away," we need not do so inwardly, for God offers us the opposite: inwardly we may be "renewed day by day." As we talked of Christian hope, he was very grateful.

Having learned that Peter was a music lover, I suggested that he listen to religious music during the days of his outward decline. He liked the idea, so I left with him three different audio-cassettes: Father Rivers' "Mass," James Hanley's "Spirit," & Mahalia Jackson's "Gospel Songs." When next I visited him, he told me the tapes had been very helpful. After his death, his wife told me that he was listening to those gospel songs when he died.

If it be remarked that I did not press upon this patient the evangelistic notes of repentance & faith, I would have several things to say: (1) A chaplain's task is not the same as an evangelist's, any more than an evangelist's task is the same as a chaplain's; (2) In college, my professor of philosophy of religion convinced me not to be anxious, in making my Christian witness, about the eternal destiny of those to whom I witness: on this matter, God keeps the mysteries of his own counsel; & (3) A believing, listening, praying presence is one's best gift to the dying & their loved ones; & the communion of saints is present in the service of the divine love & longing, which far exceeds my own.

"Life is our chance," said Henry Nouwen, to say 'Yes, Lord, I love you, too'." Ours is a servant, secondary love: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19 NRSV). That primary Love is there before we visit the dying, & abides after we leave.

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**Story #5:** Rose, 61, a faithful Roman Catholic, had been receiving regular visits from a eucharistic minister but requested visits from me as well. As she put it, "Help me to feel close to God." (She was grateful to the eucharistic minister, but was disappointed that her visits were too brief for any depth of conversation.)

After we talked of suffering & "Why me?", we prayed for the grace of Presence, that she experience the divine closeness. Saying the rosary was important to her, so I encouraged her family to say it with her.

When last I saw her, the day before she died, she was in a coma. Learning that no one had prayed the rosary with her that day, I invited the family into the sick room to pray it together, & I would join them. Her sister led, son & daughter & I joining in for the twenty-minute recitation, & I closed with a prayer of blessing.

The daughter, who had been angry at God, was much comforted by her mother's peacefulness in dying--& so was freed to be spiritually fed by Rose's resurrection faith.

Because death is so dramatically individual, it's easy to overlook the fact that all who love the deceased do some dying of their own: death, besides being radically personal, is also communal, a collective experience.

So is resurrection. In her daughter's newness of life through experiencing Rose's dying, Rose and her daughter had begun to receive the grace-gift of resurrection.

For the Christian, the model of moving immediately from death to resurrection is, of course, the Passion Narrative in the Gospels. The acceptance of God's grace-gift of forgiveness through Jesus' crucifixion-resurrection creates in the believing heart & life an attitude of gratitude that is the most powerful motivator for courage in the struggles of life & death, especially in those experiences in which loss of control tempts us to rage, despair, terror, & uncontrollable grief.

For all these reasons, we of Hospice of Cape Cod are not through after the death. All over the Cape we form grief support groups meeting regularly--including

7 children's grief groups, a program called "Kids Grieve, Too," employing a fulltime counselor. Semiannually, a Service of Memory gathers the bereaved & honors their beloved; & annually, at several points on the Cape, we have outdoor Tree of Memory services.

As everybody knows, "Amazing Grace" ends thus: "'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, / And grace will lead me home."

I'll close Rose's story by reading something my husband wrote & which is used in a number of hospices. It is a reminder that though we are responsible, Somebody else, Somebody we can & should trust, is in charge. It speaks to the commission of pastoral care as sustaining, guiding, healing, & reconciling; it is about meaning & purpose, love & relatedness, forgiveness & acceptance, hope, & reliance on the Eternal Mercies. Here it is:

Grace,  
God's caring presence,  
supervenes over and interpenetrates the common day.  
It is the food within all food,  
the comfort and strength within all assurance,  
the song that sings itself within all our moods.  
To know this is light,  
to live it is life eternal.  
The Love that will not let us go  
will not let us down.

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**Story #6:** My final story is about Tom, age 72, whose life-centering experience (call it conversion, if you will) reminds us that moments of eternal life can occur for human beings in the here & now.

Tom wanted my ear. Of course everybody who wants a hospice chaplain wants her or his ear; but Tom--who never married--was especially eager to be heard, deeply heard. Son of a Lutheran bishop, when he was only two years old he lost his mother to death. He & his father were very close, & Tom didn't sleep in his own bed till he was eight & his father remarried.

Because son & stepmother didn't get along together, he was sent off to a private school. Drafted for World War II, he saw the horrors of war in his late teens & was one of our first troops to enter a Nazi extermination camp, smelling the stench miles in advance.

That experience so traumatized & cynicized him that he became wild & alcoholic for some years & never had told any of his family about his war experiences.

Bach's music became his comfort. One day at age 27 he walked into New York's Riverside Church to hear the St. Matthew's Passion. He was overwhelmed & transformed. When he walked out of the church, he found the world radically changed--the light, the sounds, the people--as he said, "my born-again experience."

Tom's life-review into a nonjudging & empathetic ear brought him joy & peace. It was as though he were talking to himself, but outloud, when he told me that his form of prayer was listening to Bach. For me, it was as though I were hearing something timeless, timely, yet beyond time--a taste of eternal life.

And it was as though his spirit were going out ahead of his body in preparation for the resurrection. We're all impressed with the wisdom of the Native American saying "Slow down so your spirit can catch up with your body." Let's extend the metaphor: Dying well is helping your **spirit** get ahead of your **body**, in preparation for inhabiting, & being clothed with, the new, resurrection body (the two metaphors in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5).

Thus the Christian hospice chaplain is concerned with the terminal patient's preparation not only for death but also for resurrection. For the Christian, the issue at life's end is not different from the issue at the other life-stages: How can I glorify & please God in all I am & all I do? As it's put in 1 Corinthians 10:31 NRSV, "Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God."

Always, before each visit, I pray that God will guide my thoughts & words to his glory. I hope to be a spiritual meals-on-wheels. Recently--since Willis & I spent almost a week among the Moravians of Pennsylvania--our family has frequently used this old Moravian grace at meals: "Be known to us in breaking of the bread, / but

8 do not then depart. / Savior, abide with us, / & spread your table in our hearts."

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It's a truism that people die as they lived. We disciples, literally lifelong learners in the school of Christ, seek so to live that we be ready, in our dying, this earthly life's last classroom, to learn & to teach the final lessons the Master-Teacher has for us to learn & to teach--so to make a good death that the memory thereof will continue to bless the living till their own dying.

All this is in a hymn written by a dying man on his deathbed, & handed to a relative. It had eight stanzas, of which five are familiar from their presence in most hymnals now in use. I'll read three stanzas, the middle one seldom now printed, & then sit down:

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide:  
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;  
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me!

Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word,  
But as thou dwell'st with thy disciples, Lord,  
Familiar, condescending, patient, free,  
Come, not to sojourn, but abide with me.

I need thy presence every passing hour:  
What but thy grace can foil the tempter's power?  
Who like thyself my guide and stay can be?  
Through cloud and sunshine, oh, abide with me.

For publication,

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