ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS 3014
309 L.Ellz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 8.28.00
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

"SOME PRINCIPLE OF BEING ABIDES"

From "The Layers"

1 *I have walked through many lives*
2 *some of them my own,*
3 *and I am not who I was,*
4 *though some principle of being*
5 *abides, from which I struggle*
6 *not to stray.*

At New York Theological seminary it was a continuing joke that Prof. Elliott began his class-sessions with prayer, some good news from the universe (through the Bible), & some good or bad news from the day's NEW YORK TIMES (which he'd read between conversations commuting into Grand Central Terminal).

Now, I get joshed for my many Thinksheet references to that other TIMES, the CAPE COD. This morning, p.1, col.1, its head is "Poetry Devotion: Provincetown event celebrates [Stanley] Kunitz appointment as [U.S. poet] laureate." In the column are a color shot of the [95-year-old] ghost & three of his poems, including the one I shot from the page right onto this Thinksheet (with slight enlargement).

Let's not let a certain woman in this story remain invisible. Stan's mother, at 24, escaped the Eastern European pogroms, learned English, & through work in NYC sweatshops put her son through Harvard. Much of what's interesting about the oceans is on their bottom, most of history's worthies are invisible.

I translate Stan: all art has the power to be a window on what we could not see without art, & poetry as the art of words is words' window on what, being beyond words, words can only intimate indirectly.

REQUEST:
I've numbered the lines of the poem. Please, on paper or screen, write your **reflections** about each line. Only afterward, read my COMMENTARY, comparing line by line what you said & what I said. Try to imagine that the two are conversational partners, & listen in on their conversation. If right now you don't have time for this meditational exercise, set this Thinksheet aside (after reading it all!) for future action.

Note that "The Layers" is in the poem's title. Your reading the Thinksheet is layer #1. Your letting the commentaries talk with each other will be layer #2. Layer #3 is your conversation with God while engaging in all the above. And a possible #4 is extending the conversation to me by sending me your reflections on the lines.

In a group I was leading yesterday, a PhD in sociology said she feels the need of an air-lock (a submariners' term) between her hectic outer world & her would-be placid inner world. I then added the architectural space-lock (two doors with a short corridor in between) to serve not only as a sound-barrier between rooms but as a mood-shifter between solitude (privacy) in one space & society (people) in another space. You may find it helpful to think about these two structures as metaphors of meditation: if you don't take time to teach yourself to meditate (nobody else can teach you!), water will leak into your soul & drown you, sound will penetrate into your heart & deny you peace, the peace you need for praise & joy & self-transcendence.

COMMENTARY

line #1 Untrue if you're young, increasingly true as you age unless you've been holed up as a hermit. Very true of Stan & me, though he's got a doz. years on me. Never a day passes that I don't have at least one spontaneous recall of a **worthy**, by which I mean at least someone worth more thinking about, whose lives are worth my walking through again. "Anaximander" pops into my mind; & if I can't remember why I considered him a worthy, I look him up to renew my acquaintance. Then there are those whom I consider--is this an upcoming Thinksheet title?--"Recent Ancient Worthies," those I've met face-to-face who in my heart fade back into the category of ancient worthies but whose faces do not fade, so I can in reverie continue to talk with them as by videophone. But Stan's image is more powerful yet: there are worthies I know so well I can "walk through their lives" &, every time, come out the other side enriched & grateful.

But Stan's not claiming that all the lives he's "walked through" are worthy either inherently (i.e., in themselves) or relatively (i.e., worth his time, his consideration, his thinking & caring about). Even if one assumes (as I do) that everybody's worth attention *sub specie aeternitatis* (i.e., in God's eyes & in the light of eternity), we must make daily judgments about real & fictional characters as to whether they're worth our attention. Albert Schweitzer? Harry Potter? The spiritually scruffy characters in "Dallas," "Seinfeld," & "Survivor" (which three series I saw only the last segments of--all three displaying our culture's petty & grand pathologies, corruptly entertaining the videopublic). Ineluctable retaliation: we can't walk through unworthy lives without their walking through us. "Don't have anything to do with evil" (1Thes.5.22 CEV), we Christians are instructed. Sheer evil, inanity, meanness. "Hamlet," the representation of an authentic struggle of conflicting virtues & values, is not in that opprobriated category.

line #2 Shocking! "Hell is other people," said Sartre. But not only other people! All reminiscing is walking through past "layers" of our own lives, & it can be scary: "I" might get lost in the process. Indeed, Stan assumes I will be: the many layers of one's life, more the more years, will sometimes seem like "many lives" that are "my own." The line whispers the wonder & mystery of "I," of self-identity, of consciousness. And humility: at the party in his honor, when immediate-ex laureate Robt. Pinsky had passed the baton to him, Stan said he's most interested in what's to come, (as it were) the layers he's not yet lived. I thought of the Christian liturgy's "Christ died, Christ is risen, *Christ will come again!*"

line #3 Mid-poem, we confront the 1st of its three negatives. For you & me (since everybody's poems of the heart are for you & me), Stan denies he's who he was. With these words, this old Jew is not testifying to a conversion such as "Lord, I'm not what I should be & I'm not what I shall be, but I thank you I am not what I was." For him, it's not "Let go & let God." Rather, it's a Stoic courage born of a conviction he doesn't express till line #5.

This is as good a poem-layer as any to ask What is this poem's **mood**? (A question the Bible-reader should not fail to ask is What is the mood of this passage?) I see-feel the poem as Stoic-philosophical: accepting of "the layers" of his life, accepting of his every-layer encounters with "many lives," accepting of change (expressly, through his life-stages), accepting of the task to be faithful to what sustains life. The dominant mood of Epictetus & Marcus Aurelius. A mood that communicates well with many segments of American society, because Stoicism is in the (Jewish-pagan-Christian) foundations of Western civilization. A mood not Christian nor anti-Christian but proChristian, as it is proJewish.

line #4 With this line we move from psychology (his reflection on his being in relation to his life-journey) to **ontology** (his reflection about a "principle of being" itself). Instead of sinking in the bathos of narcissistic self-observation, as do many contemporary poets, he has the courage to soar into cosmic affirmation. The wording is creedal-minimalist. The old philosophical chestnut was Why is there something instead of nothing? Because, says Stan, the something there is is principled: the something is necessary to the being of principles ("first things," the Greeks called them, & thus the title of the current intellectual periodical FIRST THINGS).

Note the modesty matching the minimalism. Stan isn't about to expound the principle pertinent to his point. It is not described but only designated in relation to its point of tangency to Stan's present conviction: "*some* principle" having the status of being, not (as logical principles) only the status of thinking.

line #5 negates (his 2nd negative) the notion that Stan is radically "not who I was." The particular principle in play here is the first element in the permanence/change polarity; & Stan affirms that his personal identity "abides" by grace of this principle (which is Stoic, not Buddhist).

line #6 is sermonic in the sense that a sermon should end with an appeal to action. "Struggle!" Stan quietly shouts. Be a faithful disciple of what "abides" underneath & within & beyond the shifting sands & failing flesh. Note again his modesty. His struggle is not Promethean, defying being in the name of one's own being. Rather it is submissive (& here is his 3rd negative): Please don't let me "stray" from faithfulness to (& here is a surrogate for God) Being's Abiding Principle.