



A journal for restless minds

FOREVER —

Is composed of Nows

A LIGHTED CANDLE

Is easily extinguished

WHAT IS MAN?

A question never asked

DEACON'S DINER

Food for a restless mind

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Forever —

Is composed of Nows

The American poet Emily Dickinson, over the course of her lifetime, amassed a collection of nearly 1800 poems. Only a few were ever published; the bulk were discovered after her death in 1896, largely untitled.

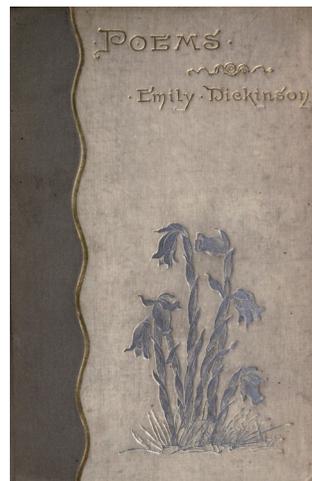
Four short two- and three-line poems are striking for their imagery and remarkable for their exquisite ethereality. Although written nearly a century and a half ago, these brief verses are truly timeless. Unlike many poets, Dickinson never suggested or ascribed meaning to her poems; most of them were never published but simply included in correspondence to friends and acquaintances. At the risk of inflicting meaning not intended, I offer my own poor thoughts to her exquisite poetry.

The first, a mere two lines of eleven words, I suppose could be viewed in

many ways, but given the poet's propensity to deal with themes of death and immortality, it would perhaps not be ill-considered to assume such a theme here.

*Not knowing when the Dawn will come,
I open every Door.*

How similar her thoughts would appear to be to what we hear in the gospel for this First Sunday of Advent (Mark 13:33-37.) Jesus tells us, "You do not know when the time will come" so be watchful, stay alert.



Likewise, Dickinson writes of not knowing when the dawn (time) will come, thus she remains ever vigilant by keeping every door open so as not to miss the dawn at its coming. The poem speaks of how we are to

live our mortal lives, knowing immortality awaits with the coming of the dawn. We cannot know when that time will come so we must never close ourselves from its unexpected arrival. We must always be prepared; we must remain vigilant; we must open every door.

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A Lighted Candle

Is easily extinguished

Time marks the passage of our lives; a measured beat, until it beats no more. And yet, does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?¹

We live by time, we die in time; we account for each and every beat with such consuming devotion; and yet, we seldom really think of time at all.

We measure time by clocks and calendars; so numerous we cannot ignore their insistent presence; is there one among us who would deny their necessity? And yet, we seldom really think of time at all.

We observe time through divers lenses; like the facets of a diamond, the measure of it depends on its utility. Consider how we mark time by calendar year, fiscal year, academic year, and even liturgical year; each with a different beginning: the Liturgical year begins about eleven months into the calendar year, five months into the fiscal year, and some twelve weeks into the academic year.

It is understandable why we mark time's passing by the motion of the earth around the sun, or for fiscal purposes, or academic scheduling, yet, the times of our lives encompass more than the movement of the universe or financial transactions or the turning of semesters. We need to understand where we fit into the unfolding history

of creation and redemption.

I am reminded of a story I once read, a parable if you will:

A young man once spent some considerable time in the company of an old monk, renowned for his asceticism. The old man's austerity fascinated the young man; he found such a lifestyle appealing in some ways, but repulsive in other ways. He could not help but wonder if there might not be an easier, more palatable way. So, in time, he asked the old man whether salvation might come by choosing a different path.

The old man quietly replied, *"There is only one way: ascent. You must climb from the full stomach to hunger, from the slaked throat to thirst, from joy to suffering. God sits at the summit of hunger, thirst, and suffering; the devil sits at the summit of the comfortable life. You must choose your path."*

The young man thought for a moment and said, *"I am young. The world is nice. I have plenty of time to choose."*

To which, ever so softly, the old man replied: *"Wake up, my child. Wake up before death*

wakes you up. Death loves the young. The inferno loves the young. Life is like a lighted candle, easily extinguished. Take care — wake up!"

"Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come." "Watch!" "What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

Three times in today's gospel we are told to stay awake, to watch, to be alert. Jesus constantly tells us to watch, to stay awake, to remain vigilant, to be prepared for the unexpected, to *"keep watch, because you know neither the day nor the hour"* (Matthew 25:13).

But is that practical advise? Is there anyone who can remain so vigilant as to always live in the present moment? How often have we been invited to live each day as if it were our last? Admirable advice, yet hardly practical if not impossible; for no one can remain so intently aware or so mentally awake for such a long time.

Let's face it, the distractions, cares, and pressures of everyday life will invariably weigh heavy on us, causing us to lose sight of what is most important. We will, in effect, tire, and sooner or later, spiritually fall asleep. So, what are we to do to awaken us from our spiritual slumber? How can we remain ever-present to God amid all of the everyday distractions?

Perhaps, what is needed is something analogous to an alarm clock, something to wake us up from spiritual sleep. I would suggest such a clock

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indeed exists and it costs nothing but a few moments of your time. Just as we are awakened each morning by a physical alarm clock, we can awaken our spirituality through prayer.

Prayer should always be an essential part of our wakeup ritual; as regular as showering, brushing our teeth, combing our hair (assuming one has some to comb,) and getting dressed for the day.

*"What happens if we don't pray on a given morning is not that we incur God's wrath, but rather that we tend to miss the morning, spending the hours until noon trapped inside a certain dullness of heart. The same can be said about praying before meals. We don't displease God by not first centering ourselves in gratitude before eating, but we miss out on the richness of what we're doing. Liturgical prayer and the Eucharist have the same intent, among their other intentions. They're meant to, regularly, call us out of a certain sleep."*²

We don't pray to make God present to us. God is already present, always present everywhere. We pray to make ourselves present to God. God, as Sheila Cassidy colorfully puts it, is no more present in church than in a drinking bar, but we generally are more present to God in church than we are in a drinking bar. The problem of presence is not with God, but with ourselves.

If everything were taken away from us and then given back, our perspective would change drastically. Victor Frankl, the author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, discovered the truth of this during a few minutes when he

was clinically dead only to be revived by doctors. When he returned to his ordinary life after this, everything suddenly became very rich: *"One very important aspect of post-mortem life is that everything gets precious, gets piercingly important. You get stabbed by things, by flowers and by babies and by beautiful things—just the very act of living, of walking and breathing and eating and having friends and chatting. Everything seems to look more beautiful rather than less, and one gets the much-intensified sense of miracles."*

The secret to prayer is not to try to make God present, but to make ourselves present to God. The secret to finding beauty and love in life is basically the same. Like God, they are already present. The trick is to make ourselves present to them. Rarely are we enough inside of our own skins, present enough to the moment, and sensitive enough to the richness that is already present in our lives.

When we expect some very important event to happen, we wait for it with excited anticipation. Jesus expects us to watch in great anticipation for the most important event of all – his return in glory at the end of time! While the second coming is for certain, the time is known only by God. The Lord's judgment comes swiftly and often unexpectedly. Jesus warns his listeners to not be caught off guard when that day arrives. It will surely come in God's good time!

The prophet Isaiah tells us that God will surely reward those who wait for his visitation: *"From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides*

you, who works for those who wait for him"

Our call is not only to believe, but to watch with expectant faith; not only to love, but to wait with eager longing; not only to obey, but to prepare with joyful anticipation! What are we to watch, wait, and prepare for? The greatest event to come: the return of the Son of Man when he comes again in glory to judge us at the end of the age.

The kind of watching our Lord has in mind is not a passive *"wait and see what happens"* approach to life. The Lord urges us to vigilance and to active prayer that his *"kingdom may come"* and his *"will be done on earth as it is in heaven"*.

We are not only to watch for the coming of Christ, but to watch with Christ. The Lord wants us to have our hearts and minds fixed on him and his word. He wants us to be ready for his action and grace in our lives and in our world. Those who *"wait"* for the Lord will not be disappointed. He will surely come with his grace and saving help.

Amen.

Homily for the
First Sunday of Advent (B)
Isaiah 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:33-37

1. From the rock band Chicago's 1969 album, *Chicago Transit Authority: Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?*, written and sung by Robert Lamm.
2. Ron Rolheiser, *In Exile: Staying Awake*, The Sunday Website of St. Louis University.

The following verse speaks again of vigilance, of the necessity to always be open to hearing God's voice, whenever he would speak to us.

*The Soul should always stand ajar
That if the Heaven inquire
He will not be obliged to wait*

What marvelous imagery! Should "Heaven inquire" evokes a profound emotional response. Imagine, God standing outside your soul, asking so politely to be invited in! Are we so filled with fear and sinfulness that we have shuttered the windows and locked and barred the door to our soul, barricading ourselves from all who would enter, even God? Have we closed ourselves off from his love? Or perhaps we are too ashamed of the mess and clutter and wish to delay for a few moments in order to tidy up before opening our soul to the Lord. No matter the reason, no matter the why, we should never oblige our Lord to wait.

It is always difficult to deal with the passing of a loved one; we grieve at our loss—because it is "our" loss for which we grieve. Although we believe in life everlasting, there is that great divide which separates mortality from immortality—there is no in-between, no grayness, no echoes—only that irreversible difference between now and forever. There is, in this barrier, a similarity to a one-way mirror: we, who are mortal, see only reflections of our own mortality, the immortal see what is and what will forever be. It differs not which side the mirror one resides, for there is no traversing past the mir-

rored glass, and yet, even that will never last.

Death comes only to the substantial, the insubstantial knows nothing of it. We are all children of God, corporeal and incorporeal, body and soul; and God who is Love loves each and every one of his children.

*Unable are the Loved to die
For Love is Immortality,
Nay, it is Deity*

Take a moment to reflect on this. The loved cannot die—our souls, created by Love, are immortal and at the resurrection our bodies will be reunited with our immortal souls for all eternity. Now consider: God is Love; Love is Immortality; and yet, Love is God (Deity.)

And finally, my personal favorite. What a clever way to envision eternity! We live in perpetual "now"; no one lives in the past, those "nows" have quickly flown; the future stretches long before us, turning into now yet again and again and again, now, then now, then now, then now ... forever.

*Forever — is composed of Nows —
'Tis not a different time —
Except for Infiniteness —*

Like each frame in a motion picture—while infinitely more fleeting—each *now* is **not** a different time but the **only** time, for all eternity. Time marches on, but *now* is forever.

Sometimes it is worth it to take a moment to remind ourselves of our own immortality. How would you dare to spend all of your *nows*.

What Is Man?

A question never asked

In the foreword to the latest edition of Frank Sheed's masterpiece, *Society and Sanity: How to Live Well Together*, Peter Kreeft introduces the first and most important point of the book, using the author's own words:

*"Our treatment of **anything** must depend, in the last resort, on what we think it is: for instance, we treat people one way and cats another, because of our idea of what a man is and what a cat is. All our institutions ... grew out of what those who made them thought a man was. ... In every field, the test of sanity is **what is**; in the field of human relations, the special test is **what man is**. ... The total ignoring of this question runs all through modern life. ... Yet it does not strike people as odd. And the depth of their unawareness of its oddness is the measure of the decay of thinking about fundamentals."*

Kreeft concludes by stating: "The book will be hated and feared, and therefore ignored, by the barbarians who have commandeered the formal and informal educational institutions of our civilization. Why? For the same reason 'Great Books' are hated and feared above all things in 'progressive' educational circles. It is the same reason cavities hate dentists. It will be feared because it dares to assume that there is such a thing as truth, and that we can and must know the most important truths about ourselves and our true happiness. It dares to ask the great old questions, the currently forbidden questions, like Socrates, or like the little boy in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. It will therefore

be labeled 'dogmatic' by those who dogmatically forbid those questions and who call themselves 'open-minded' and 'progressive'.

If you care about the 'Brave New World' our society is moving toward, and if you want to know the minimum that you must know in order to reverse that direction, this is the book you must start with."

Kreeft argues, quite correctly I would suggest, that the "greatest war today is not in the Middle East but in the Middle Earth of Europe and North America. It is a war between two world and life views, especially views of man and society. The new view was summarized most candidly by Justice Anthony Kennedy of the U.S. Supreme Court in his support of abortion in the *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision: 'At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.' In other words, 'Move over, God; you're sitting in my seat.'"

The central question which we must ask ourselves boils down to what is meant when speaking of "human life." Properly speaking, this is the subject of the "philosophy of man" or philosophical anthropology, that is the study of the meaning of human life. This is, tragically, a subject that is studiously ignored today. As Kreeft asks, "How can we become good individual human beings and how can we build a good human society if we do not know, or even ask, what humanity is and what humanity is for?"

Sheed writes at the outset that "In every field, the test of sanity is *what is*; in the field of human relations, the special test is *what man is*." He then observes:

"But in the whole of our social life man is overlooked. Man is taken simply as a word, the label for a particular kind of being (the kind to which we belong ourselves), and nobody stops for any serious consideration of what the word means. We proceed immediately to consider how to make the creature happier without ever asking what the creature is. It should be just the other way round. When some new proposal is made which affect the way men live, our immediate reaction is always to ask, Will it make men happier? But this should be the second question, not the first. The first question should be, Does it fit the nature of man? ...

Information is valuable if it helps man to be more fully and richly human: a man is integrated when all the elements of his nature are rightly related to one another and to the goal of life; the State must not require anything of its citizens which, with whatever increase of efficiency or material well-being, will diminish them as men. At every turn, not only in education, but in the whole life of Society, the treatment of human beings by one another and of the citizens by the State needs testing by the question, What is man? And it is never asked. The State does not know what man is, and is taking more and more control of man's life."

Frank Sheed was one of the best-known Catholic writers and apologists of the 20th century. *Society and Sanity* was first published in 1953, yet is perhaps even more pertinent to today. It is well worth the time to read.

Deacon's Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

On Conscience

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

Ignatius Press
2007, 82 pages.

Society and Sanity

Frank Sheed

Sheed & Ward, New York
1953, 270 pages.

Strangers in a Strange Land

Charles J. Chaput

Henry Holt and Co.
February 21, 2017, 288 pages.

PERIODICALS

First Things

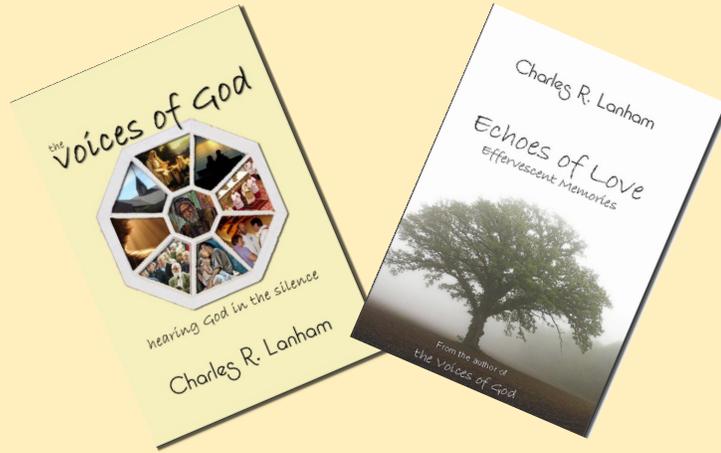
Institute on Religion and Public Life
Editor: R. R. Reno
Ten Issues per year.
www.firstthings.com

Touchstone

A Journal of Mere Christianity
Editor: James M. Kushiner
Bi-Monthly.
www.touchstonemag.com

Catholic Answers Magazine

Share the Faith, Defend the Faith
Editor: Tim Ryland
Bi-Monthly.
www.catholic.com



Books are available on **Amazon.com** or from the author's web site at:

deaconscorner.org

Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

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Each issue of **Colloquī** can be viewed or downloaded from

<http://deaconscorner.org>.

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