

A Little Lower Than The Angels

Royal Buscombe
The 1974 Jonathan Plummer Lecture
Presented at
Illinois Yearly Meeting
of the
Religious Society of Friends
McNabb, Illinois
August 4, 1974

Introduction of Royal Buscombe

Royal Buscombe was born in Toronto, the eldest of five. Her parents came from Telsonburg, the Pennsylvania Dutch part of Ontario. Someone gave her a copy of Hurlbut's *Story of the Bible* and that started her life-long interest in archaeology. She wanted to study archaeology when she attended the University of Toronto, but the closest subjects were Greek and Latin. She studied for two years at Bryn Mawr on her Masters. Royal met Bill Buscombe while at the University of Toronto. They were married on May 30, 1942, under the care of Toronto Meeting.

While a student at Bryn Mawr, she attended the Haverford Meeting. This was shortly after the time of Thomas Kelly and his presence was still very much felt. Royal helped as a teacher in the First Day School department. She helped the children put on a play about Adam and Eve in which the part of God was played by a girl.

In 1945, the Buscombes moved westward to Saskatoon. Because of the bitter cold and long drive to a Friends' Meeting, a Meeting for Worship began to meet in their living room. The twins, Dawn and Eve, and Peter were born in Saskatoon. Andy was born en route to Princeton where Bill began work on his Ph.D.

While at Princeton, Royal and Bill were active in a small group of mostly non-Quaker parents who worshipped together and thrashed out curriculum. After three years, they moved to Pasadena, California.

For two years, Bill worked on Mount Wilson and Royal became an active parent in Pacific Ackworth School. They attended the Orange Grove meeting of Friends. Martin was born in California before they went to Australia. Lucy, Kathy and Tim were born in Australia. Again, because there was no Meeting, a small group met first in the Buscombes' living room, then moved to a larger recreation building while they were living on Mount Stromlo.

When the Buscombes moved into town, there were five families who worshipped in a Canberra school. The present Meeting House is a product of their dreams and work. They lived in Australia for 16 years, then moved to Evanston six years ago.

Wherever Royal and Bill go, new activities begin to happen. Their living room is often the seedbed of new Friends' Meetings, and Friends get a new appreciation of the world and the universe around them.

Royal is an exciting combination of one who is constantly searching for knowledge and for depth in worship, and one who, also, takes time out for fun. At a recent retreat, she displayed her skill at basketball. A present love, stemming from childhood fascination, is for the circus. Each July 4th, it's a task to try to decide whether to see the circus in Wisconsin or go to the Meeting picnic.

Royal Buscombe has a magnificent way with words. She brings a personal dimension of life and love to all her experiences. When telling of AFSC projects or United Nations visits or tours, it is the people she speaks of and how lives are changed by events or experiences. Friends who heard her at Illinois Yearly Meeting were touched by this deeply dedicated and fascinating Friend.

A Little Lower Than The Angels

I believe the Plummer Lecture was established to enable the members of Illinois Yearly Meeting to share their knowledge and their talents. I don't have much talent and I certainly don't have much knowledge, so when I received the invitation to speak, I was very puzzled to know what to speak about and what was expected of me, I finally accepted because I rather enjoy trying to create order out of chaos, in this case the chaos of an undisciplined mind into which a full life and a healthy curiosity have stuffed all manner of ideas and experiences. My background explains some of this. An early interest in the ancient world of the Old Testament led me into university studies in classical Greek and Latin and then on into graduate work on the connections between the classical world of Greece and Rome (on which we think our civilization is based) and the still earlier civilizations of the ancient Near East, but I gave up my studies to concentrate instead on bringing up a husband and eight children, an adventure which took me from North America to Australia and back again, living in two British countries, Canada and Australia, as well as in the United States. While living in Australia, through many new friends, I discovered the Orient and the Pacific Islands and added a whole new dimension to my knowledge of the cultural manifestations that mankind has produced.

Through all of this, I have been deeply religious, I don't know why, not in a churchy sense, though I was brought up in traditional Protestant Christianity, but in the sense of feeling an inner orientation toward something I cannot touch or hear or see, but somehow know exists behind and beyond all that I can experience through the senses and the imagination. Yet I am sufficiently intellectual to want to understand my religious feelings as well as experience them. The great paradox of trying to know the unknowable, explain the inexplicable, and communicate the unspeakable is what theology and philosophy are really all about, I suppose.

So here I am, wife and mother, a domestic engineer both by necessity and choice, ready to share with you the small fruits of a life which has been ideal in the sense of giving me time to think and things to think about. Some of you who are in the throes of being parents may not be certain that a so-called housewife ever can find time to think creatively. I should, therefore, acknowledge the tremendous value of Josephine Benton's book, *The Pace of a Hen*. It should be on everyone's kitchen shelf along with the cookbooks, the guides to spot and stain removal and help for the ailing house, for it is truly a survival manual for the harried. Without its advice, I doubt whether I would ever have found time to think at all and I certainly would not be standing here with my knees knocking. I hope before I finish that I will be able to answer my daughter's question (and my own!) when I had told her I had been asked to give this lecture, "What would *you* have to talk about?"

I should tell you that I have always been a pack rat. Anything interesting or potentially useful, I just tuck away somewhere in an already overflowing drawer until I have time to look at it again, give it away (the family always hopes that is what will happen), use it, or tuck it back in the drawer for next time. It makes moving a traumatic experience. A pack rat is not systematic like a collector who organizes his collection and knows more or less what's in it. Being a pack rat is really rather more fun because you are never sure when you start to fumble through that drawer just what you have in there and, of course, that makes it difficult when you need something you know you have but can't find. However, while looking for it you may find something you didn't know you needed until you found it there again among your treasures. Is that called serendipity? I think so.

I am not only a pack rat about things, I am a pack rat about ideas, particularly ideas that I don't understand. As a result, the drawers of my mind are filled with bits of poems, a paragraph or two, a phrase that ought to make sense and doesn't, fleeting religious experiences, and quite often a little collection of ideas that I am vaguely uneasy about but put away so that eventually I can look at them again and find out why. Out front, of course, on top of the drawers, I keep the ideas and experiences I am really firmly convinced about and want to share with others. It is good to be a seeker, but sometimes it is necessary to confess to being a finder, too. We seem to be very much in need just now of Publishers of Truth, a phrase our Quaker forbearers didn't hesitate to use of themselves. Jesus pointed out that if you have a candle, you do not put it under a bushel basket. Even if it is only a very small candle, it should be shared.

One of the puzzles I have been saving, taking out and examining from time to time over the years, fitting pieces in here and there, happens to be a quotation from the Bible, or rather two quotations, an old Testament one from Psalm 8 and the way it is quoted in the New Testament in Hebrews ii. 5 ff. Psalm 8 is a very short one. It glorifies God for caring enough about man to put all of God's earthly creation in subjection to him. I'd just like to say a footnote about that word subjection. To the man who wrote this Psalm, subjection did not necessarily mean exploitation. Ancient kings and rulers when they put up monuments to themselves made a point of listing the ways in which they had benefited the people they'd ruled. They may have exaggerated just a little bit, but that's human nature. There's one city ruler who boasted of his patronage of the arts and all that we know of him is that there are 37 busts of him. But these rulers did expect to be judged worthy or unworthy rulers according to how well their people fared under their government. We should look at the list of extinct and endangered species. The pollution of our lakes and rivers

and destruction of our forests and farmlands and think about how history will judge us on this charge. To get back to the psalm, it glorifies God for caring:

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
The moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained,
What is man, that thou art mindful of him?
And the son of man, that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels,
And hast crowned him with glory and honour.

A little lower than the angels! Is that what man was made to be? When I look out on man, and see the works of *his* fingers, when I look at the inward self that I know, I cannot help but puzzle over this passage more and more. What is man? What does it mean to be a little lower than the angels? I think men have always asked this question one way or another and the folklore of all civilizations is full of stories in which they tried to come to solutions about different aspects of it. I'd like to use some of the less familiar stories from ancient civilizations to illustrate some of my own answers.

It may be a good idea to have a look first at some of the accepted characteristics of angels. They live forever, apparently. They exist to serve God and surround him with praise and adoration. They see him face to face unharmed. They are happy. They *know*; the universe holds no secrets for them; they are not tormented by the desire to find out how everything works. Almost all of these characteristics are lacking in man. Man's conception of an angel is of a being that is perfect in all the ways man feels himself imperfect. Our myths, our literature, our art, all explore these imperfections and our reactions to them.

One of man's most troublesome imperfections that I am learning more about is that he grows old and eventually dies. The American way of hiding away the old and dying and pretending we can stay young forever is one of the least satisfactory ways of dealing with our unease about death. Faust selling his soul to the devil in return for youth was a similar exercise in futility. Facing up to the fact of death has always been very hard. So the search for immortality is a very ancient one. Let me retell the story of the ancient hero Gilgamesh who lost a beloved friend to death and decided to find the secret of eternal life for himself. This tale comes from Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which is now Iraq. It dates back certainly to 2000 B.C. and quite probably there were versions of it even before that time. When it was discovered on tablets at Nineveh in the mid-19th century, it caused a terrific furor among students of the Bible because it contains a version of the story of Noah that is much older than the Old Testament and this story furnished the first inkling that there was a great literature behind our familiar Bible stories.

The oldest people we know in Mesopotamia were the Sumerians and Gilgamesh may very well have been a real Sumerian king. In the epic he is pictured as a sort of super-hero, a wild young man of exuberant energy, always chasing the women and embroiling his fellow countrymen in wars with neighboring states. At a council of the elders, called to discuss how to keep him under control, it was suggested that perhaps what he needed was a friend of similar prowess with

whom he could go off on adventurous expeditions that would keep him, they hoped, as far as possible away from his home town. They found such a potential friend in a creature half-man, half-beast, who lived and talked with the wild animals and angered the hunters by releasing their prey from the traps. They decided to kill two birds with one stone by breaking up this alliance and finding a friend for their intemperate ruler. They sent a prostitute to the forest, and when the man-beast lost his innocence, the animals deserted him and he was forced to turn to men for companionship. Incidentally this is one of the earliest stories of women beguiling men to their destruction which are common in the Bible, beginning with Eve, to occur again and again through literature and which have fostered an attitude which persists today, all women's lib efforts to the contrary.

No one had ever stood up to Gilgamesh in combat, but the man-beast does and when their battle ends in a draw, recognizing one another as worthy opponents, they become fast friends. This is a quality that women can never understand in men, I might add. After many glorious adventures together, the two get delusions of grandeur, are impudent to the gods, and the gods finally decide that one of them must die. Gilgamesh's friend wastes away in a long and painful illness. When he finally dies, Gilgamesh, in a fury of disbelief, sits beside him trying to call him back to life until, as one version has it, "a worm fell from his nose," and Gilgamesh knows at last that his friend is gone forever.

There has recently been published a very fine narrative poem by Herbert Mason called *Gilgamesh*. In this quotation, the friend is speaking:

He looked at Gilgamesh and said:
You will be left alone, unable to understand
In a world where nothing lives any more
As you thought it did.
Nothing like yourself, everything like dead
Clay before the river makes the plants
Burst out along its beds ...
That is what it is to be a man. You'll know
When you have lost the strength to see
The way you once did. You'll be alone and wander
Looking for that life that's gone or some
Eternal life you have tried to find.

Those of you who know the life of Buddha cannot help but remember at this point that it was the death of an old man which sent him forth on his quest, not to find eternal life, but to find a way of dealing with the way things are. Gilgamesh is not inclined to accept death as part of the way things are for him. In anguish he declares,

Fearing death I roam over the steppe;
The matter of my friend rests heavy upon me.
How can I be silent? How can I be still?

My friend whom I loved has turned to clay;
Must I too, like him, lay me down
Not to rise again for ever and ever?"

And so he goes on a long quest for the secret of eternal life, learns that it had been given to the Sumerian version of Noah and sets out to find him. He is not deterred by being told on his journey,

Gilgamesh, whither are you wandering? Life, which you look for, you will never find. [And life here means eternal life] For when the gods created man, they let death be his share, and life withheld in their own hands.

Do you remember in Genesis iii.22 when Adam is driven out of the Garden of Eden?

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever: therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

It must have been a very common scene in ancient pre-Biblical literature. When at last Gilgamesh finds the Sumerian Noah, he is told that his immortality was a gift from the gods, but that there is a certain thorny plant deep in the sea which is the plant of life. Gilgamesh ties stones to his feet, dives down and picks the plant. (Native pearl fishers in the Indian Ocean still use precisely this method to get them down to the bottom of the sea.) On the way home Gilgamesh stops beside a pool to rest and bathe and a serpent comes and eats the plant, leaving only its sloughed-off skin to show he had been there.

This story explained for its hearers not only why Gilgamesh did not succeed in gaining eternal life, but also why the serpent seems to renew itself by shedding its skin. Gilgamesh returns home; people have already forgotten his dead friend, and he can only console himself by looking at the height of the city walls his people have been building while he has been gone, the eternal resort to materialism. I could tell you other stories of ancient man's preoccupation with death. Against such a background it is small wonder that one of the triumphant declarations of Jesus' disciples was that he had overcome death and made it possible for his followers to have life eternal. It was extremely important that he had been born as a human being, "shared in flesh and blood," as Hebrews ii.14 puts it, subject to the limitations of humanity, and yet in dying (Heb. ii.18) "delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage." As Christians we can accept the way things are because we believe that the end of life is not an ending but a beginning. William Penn wrote a wonderful passage which sets forth the Christian view of immortality and how it is attained: by living this life in a way that ensures attaining "the Life that never ends."

The truest end of life is to know the Life that never ends.
He that makes this his Care, will find it his Crown at last.
And he that lives to live ever, never fears dying:
nor can the means be terrible to him
that heartily believes the end.

For though Death be a Dark passage, it leads to Immortality,
And that's Recompense enough for Suffering of it.
And yet Faith lights us even through the Grave,
being Evidence of Things not seen.

And this is the Comfort of the Good,
that the Grave cannot hold them,
and that they live as soon as they die.
For Death is no more
than a turning over of us from time to eternity.
Death, then, being the way and condition of Life,
we cannot love to live, if we cannot bear to die.
-- (From *Some Fruits of Solitude*, 1693.)

Not only does man himself grow old and die but everything he can see, big and little, is subject to similar processes of change, the change may be slow, as in the erosion of seashores, the deepening of river beds and the life cycle of stars, or swift, as in the growth and decay of plants and animals. In our own day, social and technological change is proceeding at a greatly accelerated pace, so that man has become ever more insecure. He has postulated in his religion a god who is timeless and unchanging. If everything else changes, inevitably he questions whether he is wrong. Is it true that underneath are the everlasting arms? Perhaps God himself can grow old and die and leave man completely alone in a hostile universe. To me this fear shows a complete lack of comprehension of what is going on in the change we see. For example, the rocks on a seashore over the ages are ground into sand. That sand may very well in future ages be compressed into rock again, but whatever happens to it, it is not lost. A plant decays but its elements go to nurture new plants. Things do not end; they just go on in other forms. What a limitation we have put on God by expecting that he and he alone must be unchanging!

I do not know Hebrew, but according to those who do. there is an interesting passage in the story of Moses which has a direct bearing on what I have been saying. You remember when Moses sees the burning bush and God instructs him to go to Egypt and free his chosen people, Moses puts up quite an argument. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Sons of Israel out of Egypt?" God persists and finally Moses says, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" In English it reads, Moses, "I AM WHO I AM... Say to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" What the Hebrew really says is not "I am who I am" but "I shall be what I shall be." In other words the nature of God is such that he is eternally able to be relevant to new generations in changing circumstances and with changing ideas about him and his world. Believing in such a god, I can see change as an expression of his eternal nature and an

opportunity to go adventuring with God. I think a lot of people have given up the church because they felt hemmed in. I'm inclined to think God feels the same way. A minister friend of mine in Australia said once, "The history of the church is a series of episodes in which God burst out of the boxes in which people tried to confine him."

The Buddhists say that the only thing that does not change is the fact that things change. They seem to feel that such a truth rules out the possibility of the existence of God because God by definition would have to be unchanging. What I am saying is that God is all of it, changeless and changing, the very essence of existence.

As the soul pervades the body, God pervades the world;
As the soul sustains the body, God sustains the world;
As the soul survives the body, God survives the world;
As there is a unitary and single soul in the body, so there is a unitary and single God to the world;
Wherefore let the soul of the body praise Him who is, as it were, the soul of the world."

-- (Quoted by Milton Steinberg, in *Basic Judaism*, Harcourt, Brace & Co.)

Those who comprehend the truth of this old rabbinic interpretation of the relationship of God to the world can go forth unafraid of change.

These things that we've been talking about, death and change, are things to which we can be reconciled in a rational sort of way. But there is another unease in man that seems a part of his nature and with which it is virtually impossible to deal on a rational basis. I am speaking of what I can only describe as a sort of cosmic loneliness, a loneliness that can seemingly only be ameliorated, never cured, by human love in friendship or marriage, by throwing oneself into the enjoyment of nature, or by standing as it were foursquare and independent against all the forces that buffet us in a lifetime. You know that attitude "I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul," as W. E. Henley put it. Few people seem so stalwart nowadays. Modern writers have dealt with this feeling of alienation as if it were peculiar to modern man. Yet several hundred years before Christ, Plato told a charming story to explain how it had come about. It seems that originally man had four arms, four legs and two heads, and went cartwheeling swiftly and happily over the world with great speed and mobility. After some misdemeanor, probably again an insolent attitude toward the gods, it was decided that he must be punished by being split into two separate halves. Ever since, Plato said sadly, each of us has gone through life searching without success for his other half. That is the feeling I mean when I speak of a sort of cosmic loneliness. Coupled with it sometimes is a feeling of being beleaguered, of being pursued by something we do not understand. We can do one of two things: either we run, clutching our loneliness to ourselves, gathering crumbs of comfort from our contacts with people or our enjoyment of nature's beauties, or else we subside into the aimlessness and alienation so typical of modern man. I wish I could read to you the whole of Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven," for it is the classic description of the symptom, and, quite gloriously, of the cure. He tells us that loneliness is something God put in us to be overcome, and that God is the initiator in

that overcoming. Yet man fears Him and tries to escape the love that God wants to pour out. You know how it begins:

I fled Him down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

There seems to earthbound man to be a basis for that fear.

For though I knew His love Who followed,
Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.

And so he tries every recourse, every means of escape, but confesses at last that he stands

grimed with smears ...
amid the dust o' the mounded years,
my mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.

At his lowest point, seeing a glimmer of the truth, he says,

Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?

And God responds,

Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest,
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.

Francis Thompson's poem about the man who searches everywhere for contentment and a feeling of safety and meaning for his life is very simply summed up in the words of St. Augustine, who had himself travelled that fearsome and futile road. He said, "Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."

Man was made so that he might discover that he is a part of God. God goes out of his way to help us make this discovery. But it demands surrender. We must lose our life to find it. Douglas Steere put it beautifully in his introduction to Kierkegaard's *Purity of Heart*:

When all is known that can be known, the responsible core of the will in man has still to yield. He must act, he must choose, he must risk, he must make the leap ... There is no other entry into the deeper level of existential living as an individual.

Whether we like it or not, we are chosen people. God made us to be his own. Nevertheless, we have to be choosing people too.

I am not sure whether in this life we are ever able to be anything more than a little lower than the angels, but I know that, putting our hand in the hand of God, we get increasingly more frequent glimpses of his nature. For myself, bedazzled by ideas of divine omnipotence and celestial harmony, what I did not expect to find was a suffering God.

As a result, I was very much puzzled when I first ran across the sentence, "Christ will continue to be crucified until the end of the world." Sitting at my kitchen table one morning opening the mail, I found out what it meant. An AFSC appeal pamphlet described the death of a Vietnamese girl from injuries she received by touching off a land mine. She was one of a group of women compelled by soldiers to keep on working in an area they knew was mined. This girl had already lost her legs in a similar accident, and had gone through the long and painful process of being healed and learning to walk again with artificial limbs at the AFSC center at Quang Ngai. She was brought once more to Friends after the accident, and when they urged her to fight for her life, she simply said, "No, I am too tired." (And so she died.)

I know there are people who were stirred to terrible anger by this pamphlet, and that was my initial response, but suddenly I felt only the most agonizing sorrow. I mourned not for her — her sufferings were ended — but for her fellowmen who had treated her so callously, and not her alone but thousands of others in this and other wars, and in other situations of poverty and famine and degradation throughout the ages and into our own time. As I mourned I realized that I also mourned for myself and somehow too I mourned *for* God and **with** God. The feeling was both within me and without. It was greater than I could ever feel for anything by myself. It was as if I was taking part in some sort of divine cosmic grief. Tom Kelly knew it, too, when he said,

There is a sense in which, in this terrible tenderness, we become one with God and bear in our quivering souls the sins and burdens, the benightedness and the tragedy of the creatures of the whole world, and suffer in their suffering, and die in their death.

-- *Testament of Devotion*, Harper & Bros., p. 106

Georgia Harkness knew it too when she wrote her poem:

I listen to the agony of God,
I who am fed,
Who never yet went hungry for a day.
I see the dead,
The children starved for lack of bread;

I see and try to pray.

I listen to the agony of God,
I who am warm,
Who never yet have lacked a sheltering home.
In dull alarm
The dispossessed of hut and farm
Aimless and transient roam.

I listen to the agony of God,
I who am strong,
With health and love and laughter in my soul.
I see a throng
Of stunted children reared in wrong,
And wish to make them whole.

I listen to the agony of God,
But know full well
That until I share their bitter cry,
Earth pain and hell,
Can God within my spirit dwell
To bring his kingdom nigh.

The miraculous thing I realized from this experience is that somehow God, who could certainly create a perfect world, has chosen instead to create a world that is not perfect and whose imperfection causes him a suffering that is deeper than anything we can imagine. He has created us so that he may win us to himself by love rather than by coercion, and he has given us the option of rejecting him and causing great pain to ourselves, to others of his creatures, and, because we are a part of him, to God himself. But in giving us this option, he has made it possible for us to be his co-creators, rather than his slaves. To be a little lower than the angels is to have the opportunity to become the sons of God. We do it the hard way, by coming into the world not quite knowing why we are here or who sent us. We see, as Paul so aptly put it, through a glass darkly. The image in a smoked glass mirror is all that we can see. But we are constantly being nudged toward a realization of our divine calling. If you want to read one of the most lucid and compelling accounts of how that nudging goes on, you should look into C. S. Lewis' autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*. Lewis had for years resisted belief in God. His autobiography is the theme of "The Hound of Heaven" all over again, and toward the end there is a most moving passage:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen College, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the

most dejected and reluctant convert in all England, I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing: the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words *compelle intrare*, compel them to come in, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.

-- *Surprised by Joy*, Geoffrey Bles, p. 215

Once through those high gates, life takes on a new and deeper meaning for us. There is sorrow but there is also unspeakable joy, too. We never get to the end of it. The journey is not done. Indeed with such companionship the road ahead is more alluring than ever. We yearn with Tennyson's Ulysses

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.

We can truly say with him,

I am a part of all that I have met,
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.

As we move into that untravelled world of ours, accepting both its sorrow and its joy, as God's co-creators, we accept also our responsibility for it. Our religion is not the opiate of the people, as Marx would have it, nor does it put its emphasis on "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by," as other social critics have said. We have been given a charge to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus told us quite firmly that the kingdom of God is within ourselves; so we must start there, with our own natures and attitudes. There is a phrase in most Quaker marriage vows, "promising with divine assistance...." It recognizes the practical reality that we need divine assistance to be divine, not only in marriage but in every other relationship. We have found God putting himself out for us. If we are to be divine, perfect as our father in heaven is perfect, we are going to be lovers and seekers, putting ourselves out for others. We are going to think twice about looking at other people in terms of how well they meet our needs, and look at ourselves in terms of how well we follow the commandment, "Feed my lambs."

Now, before I put away my thoughts, and close the drawer, let me read you once more our quotation, this time from Hebrews ii.6 ff., in the Revised Standard Version:

What is man that thou art mindful of him,
or the son of man, that thou carest for him?
Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels,
Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor,
Putting everything in subjection under his feet.

"Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels." I wonder why I've never noticed before, that phrase "for a little while"? I'd better put that away to think about another time. Perhaps it has something to do with that favorite passage from Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar.
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.