



# CHARLES RIVER

ESSAYS AND MEDITATIONS FOR DAILY READING

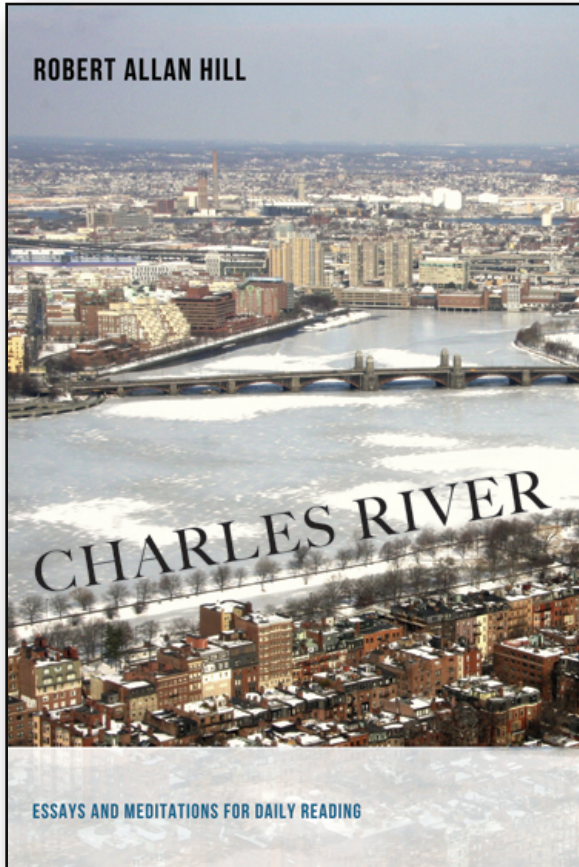
ROBERT ALLAN HILL

This collection of theological essays, spiritual meditations, public prayers and biblical interpretations provides a focus, day by day, for contemplation and reflection. By intention they are offered in *media res*, in the midst of the cacophony and chaos of life and particularly of academic life.

These pages are markings along the journey, on the trail, and thus perhaps signposts for others coming along the same way. To some degree, the collection responds to similar, recent publication of 200-word daily selections from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The assembly of materials revisits a favorite form of an earlier Dean of Marsh Chapel, Howard Thurman. Thurman easily and regularly captured thought and feeling in an assortment of forms—prayer, sermon, hymn, poem, litany, sermon—and worried very little about repetitions or the jostling inherent in formal variety.

*Charles River* follows after these and similar works, and is offered as a daily resource for those receiving and offering, the divine grace of freedom, acceptance, forgiveness, pardon, and love.

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# Charles River

Essays and Meditations for Daily Reading

ROBERT ALLAN HILL

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CHARLES RIVER  
Essays and Meditations for Daily Reading

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I dedicate this book, and in truth all the others, currently eleven, to my beloved wife, Jan. Janette Lee Pennock Hill, whom I have known forty-five years, to whom I have been married for thirty-seven, and by whom, day by day, I have been given, shown, taught, and embraced in love.

In addition, I want to thank Mr. Jason Ford for the unstinting, excellent editing he has provided this volume, as he so well did for my earlier book on John, *The Courageous Gospel*. Further, I want to thank my dear friend and colleague over many years, the Rev. Susan S. Shafer, for the original gift that inspired the development of this collection.

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# Contents

*Preface* | ix

January | 1

February | 36

March | 65

April | 99

May | 135

June | 169

July | 204

August | 246

September | 291

October | 323

November | 355

December | 390

---

---

# Preface

A few years ago, a dear friend gave me as a Christmas gift a book of writings by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The collection was assembled for daily reading. Each was about 200 words, most of them short essays in thought, some of them prayers or poems or meditations.

I had never had a morning reading collection of the sort. Sometime in the early winter I put Bonhoeffer's essays on my bureau. I found I could finish dressing, fill my suit pockets with various assorted pens and notebooks and wallet and what not, adjust my tie, and all the while truly enjoy reading his words. They were not a daily devotional, but they were a daily help. I used the collection to my advantage all year long.

Eberhard Bethge joined us for dinner one evening at Union Theological Seminary, ten of us around a table in Hastings Hall, with the Broadway traffic rattling past, in November of 1976. He told us about Bonhoeffer, his teacher and friend. It was the quiet Bonhoeffer, the reflective, ruminating mind, the man who had been young himself in Hastings Hall forty years earlier, who deeply impressed me, as Bethge spoke during that simple dinner. The daily essays returned me to that introduction, nearly forty years later. A decade, four decades, eight decades—hardly any time at all.

I resolved at the end of the year to try to put together such an assortment of essays and other pieces. Perhaps they will be a help to some others, as his were to me. The collection is one part homiletical, one part pedagogical, one part devotional, even as my current role at Boston University is part preacher, part professor, part pastor—Dean of Marsh Chapel, Professor of New Testament, and University Chaplain. In our ninth year of sojourn in Boston, along the River Charles, shimmering at night, rolling in the morning, historic and iconic and bucolic in every season, I name the essays for the river, the river that runs to the sea, and to the sea that is never full.

January

## Bill Huber

Once when our son was ten years old, he accompanied me during a visit with two parishioners. Mary and Bill had married just after the Second World War. They raised four daughters, who all had become vibrant, creative, caring adults. In addition they found time to prepare the Altar for Sunday, to sit through various Worship Committee meetings, to take an interest in local politics, to read and learn and grow in change, as faith intersected with life.

During the October that Bill was dying, our son Ben went with me once to see him. On an earlier visit, Bill had told me about his experience in the war. At age 20 Bill had become a pilot, and had flown 30 missions from England into and over Germany. His plane had been shot down once. He had survived, though not all of his crew had survived. He had carried responsibility for an airplane, a crew, many missions, and to some small but human degree, the outcome of the war itself. He was honored and decorated when the war ended. 30 missions later, several deaths later, many hours of anxious service later, many buildings and bridges destroyed later, after three years in command in England in the air in the war, he came home. He was 22. Bill was 22 years old, when the war ended, and he came home.

I cannot remember how this happened, but our son either asked to see or was offered to see Bill's flight jacket. It was a heavy, worn, brown leather flight jacket, waist long with an old center zipper. At age 10, and I do not remember how this happened, whether he asked or was offered, Ben donned the jacket. He was small in it, but Bill himself was somewhat small, and the jacket fit, if poorly. Here was a moment when Mary, soon to be a widow, and Bill, soon to be dead, and Ben, soon to be 11, and I, soon to conduct a funeral, were fully quiet together. With that jacket Bill came home, 30 missions later, a war won, at 22 years of age. 22. A young man. Bill worked the next 40 years as a public relations writer for a small manufacturing company, a quiet life of backroom pencil sharpening, phoning, rewriting, and mailing.

Some moments stand frozen in time. Our son in Bill's jacket is one. Bill's primary work, his main adult life, as he reflected on all of his life, was completed by age 22. Which leads to a question: Where did we ever get the idea that young people are not capable of great things?

*January 1*



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## A Teacher's Influence

Somehow, with four growing children and a preacher's meager salary, my parents managed to give us all piano lessons. My teacher was a farm wife, thirty years younger than her husband. The distance from the barn to the house, from the manger to the piano, was very short, in both geographic and olfactory senses. I feel the warmth of that space and that tutelage today, even though those precious parsonage dollars were almost entirely wasted on me, to my regret. I can't play a scale, after at least 5 years of lessons. I can though appreciate the difficulty of what others do. And there was something more, somewhere between Lewis and Freud, in those afternoon lessons, which usually began with an honest question: "Did you practice?" and a less than honest response: "Some."

You know, looking back that was one of the few places and times, week by week, when I was in the sole presence of a non-parental adult: honest, trustworthy, kind, caring. Now where the farm was there is an auto dealer and a pizza parlor. But the hay, the barn, the milking, the home, the warmth, the music, the teaching, the—may I call it friendship—live on. In her forties she died of cancer, three fine children, one great marriage, several years of crops and evenings and mornings of milking, and some less than stellar piano students later. At her funeral the minister preached this sermon: "You Are A Song That God Is Singing." That itself is thirty years ago, but I remember it in full. "You Are A Song That God Is Singing." You are too. And so are you. And so are you.

*January 2*

## Schweitzer

Maybe we need to remember Albert Schweitzer.

A child organ prodigy, a youthful New Testament scholar, a young principal in his Alsatian theological seminary, a man whose books and articles I used with profit in my own dissertation a few years ago, Schweitzer's life changed on the reading of a Paris Mission Society Magazine.

As a scholar, he wrote: "He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word, 'Follow me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."<sup>1</sup>

What he wrote of Jesus became his life. He left organ and desk, studied medicine, and practiced in Africa for 35 years, calling his philosophy, 'a reverence for life.'

Vocation leads to God. A decision about vocation leads to nearness to the divine.

*January 3*

1. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 389.

## Preaching: Irving G Hill

Preaching is not Bible study, but  
It does require Biblical understanding  
Preaching is not theology, but  
There must be theology in it.  
Preaching is not biography, but  
It does require an understanding of people.  
Preaching is not teaching, but  
It is instructional.  
Preaching is not social ethics, but  
It must point to social responsibility.  
Preaching is one vehicle God has chosen  
That can grow life.  
Preaching is humbling,  
Frightening,  
And Rewarding!

*January 4*

## Bird Song

The gospel is our spoken gift of faith.

Every bird sings faith, over the globe, through all time. Thurman loved penguins, odd and remote. Listen. Along the Charles, in the spring, make way for goslings and ducklings. Mid-island in Bermuda, I hear the song: Early in the summer mornings, out in the land currently under the death cloud of possible fracking, where we live, at dawn a rooster. Two eagles—they too mate for life, as in Christian marriage—soaring, I only imagine their music. The owl at night. A swan song, a silver swan, who living had no note. The gospel is a bird in song, and all nature sings. Even if or when the preaching of the gospel by human imperfection abates, as it does threaten to do, birdsong will carry the tune.

Just as there are so many, sorry, reasons to skip church, so too there are many, sorry, reasons, in the space of 4000 earthly Sundays, to skip faith. Faith is only real gold, real faith, when it is all you have to go on.

*January 5*

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## Capital Campaign Invocation 2012: Boston University

Gracious God, Holy and Just

Thou whose greatness is formed in goodness, and whose goodness is the pathway  
To greatness

We pause at the outset of our shared journey, along the banks of the River Charles  
To lift a word of thanks and to ask for a measure of blessing.

Tonight, we pause to give thanks

For this good place, Boston University

For its long, good history in learning and virtue and piety

For the goodness of its people and leaders and laborers in the current season

For all the good heart and minds of the devoted people in this room

Who together are trying to shape a better future through this good University

On the cusp of this campaign for all that we have inherited from those who came

Before us, we offer our heartfelt thanks.

Tonight, we pause to seek a blessing

We need a blessing if we are to choose to be great

We need a blessing if we are to dare to do something new and big and noble

We need a blessing if we are to struggle toward an impressive great goal

We need a blessing if we are to work together for a school we love, and for a

Future that surpasses our past

Lord, we shall need a blessing for this adventure, this journey, this

On the cusp of this campaign we open ourselves to the possibilities of blessings

Both divine and human

Now as we break bread together around a common table, over a fine meal, and in a  
spirit of familiarity and humility, we offer our thanks and seek thy blessing, Thou whose  
greatness is formed in goodness, and who goodness is the pathway to greatness. A prayer  
of thanks and blessing.

Amen.

*January 6*

## Choral Synoptics

Each Synoptic passage is like a choral piece, including four voices. There is the Soprano voice of Jesus of Nazareth, embedded somewhere in the full harmonic mix. In Matthew 9, Jesus conflicts with the Pharisaic aversion to pagan inscriptions and iconography. There is the alto voice of the primitive church, arguably always the most important of the four voices, that which carries the forming of the passage in the needs of the community. From Mark to Matthew an insertion has arisen, the citation of Hosea 6:6. Evidently, the earliest church needed the fuller support of the prophetic tradition—mercy not sacrifice, compassion not holiness—as it moved farther out and away from the memory of Jesus. The tenor line is that of the evangelist. Matthew is here, marking his own appearance in the record. His work seems to reflect a connection to school, to scribes, perhaps as Stendahl said from across the river, years ago, to Qumran. The baritone is borne by later interpretation, beginning soon with Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*: “What doctor, when wishing to cure a sick man, would act in accordance with the desires of the patient, and not in accordance with the requirements of medicine?”<sup>1</sup> If our church music carries only one line, we may be tempted to interpret our Scripture with only one voice, and miss the SATB harmonies therein, to our detriment.

*January 7*

1. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, edited by Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 377.

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## Dean James Stamas Dinner

Invocation

Romans 12: 9

Gracious God

Pausing at table, enthralled with this evening's welcome, we again recall the grace of hospitality.

We remember those in our families who taught us by example.

We recall mothers' hands that held us and fed us and welcomed us into the world, before we could speak.

We see again fathers' tables around which we were fed, in spirit and in body.

We remember the moments of intimate candle light, of quiet promise, of spirited mirth, given us by friends and loved ones.

We are personally grateful for the example of Dean James Stamas, in work and life, in profession and in person, a Dean of Hospitality and a hospitable Dean.

At twilight tonight we see those who this week have broken a month long fast about a common table, and those who honor days high and holy around a common table, and those who revere the memory of a borrowed upper room and a common table.

Tonight we feel again the beauty of creation, the starry heavens above and the moral law within. We warm ourselves before the embers of memory and under the stars of hope, before the embers and under the stars.

Make of us we pray a joyously hospitable people, who remember those in need, who remember the call to live in the service of the city, in the heart of the city.

Amen.

*January 8*

## E-Trouble

One day you encounter e-trouble. My son knows I think the world gets better one conversation at a time, and worse one email at a time. He clerks for a federal judge. One morning my son called me with this story. "I knew you would enjoy it Dad," he said. "It involves trouble and email." Well, apparently in the judicial employment system, when one falls ill and runs out of sick days, others can take from their account and give to the need. A worker received days from about twenty others, healed, and went back to work. The colleague who organized the sick day bank support assayed to write a thank you note, which she did. It was a very simple note, graciously thanking the donors, reporting on the healing, and wishing all well. This would have been no problem. Except that in mailing the thank you note, she hit the wrong key, and sent to the wrong list, not a list of twenty donors, but a general list of 200,000 judicial employees. Here is a trouble, a day's own trouble, organically designed for the tweeter, list serve, email, website 21st century. Oops. Yet even this would also have been no problem. Except that a lawyer in Arizona took umbrage at the e-incursion, and said so in a curtly written note: "not my issue, not my problem, you invaded my space, thanks but no thanks, plus I really do not agree with this whole socialist sick day swapping anyway."

Which would have been alright, too. Except that she hit 'reply all,' and, in the next hour, said my son, he had 100 emails in his box. Yes, Sick Day Bank! No Arizona! Yes Thank You Note! No To Rude Response! Yes to Liberty, No to Obama (I have no idea how he got in there) . . . Until one kindly attorney from the St Lawrence River area shouted out: "STOP. This is what makes people suspicious of lawyers in general and federal workers in particular. We have better things to do with our time." This also would have been no problem. Except. Except that before he signed off he wrote: "PS, while I have your attention, I want you to know that I am an amateur chef, and I would like to take this opportunity to share with you all *my favorite recipe for cooking salmon.*" Yes, he hit reply all. And on the day went: Salmon Yes! Salmon No! Amateur Chef Yes! Email recipe, NO! . . .

*January 9*



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## Reflections on E. Kohak: The Embers and the Stars

We shall dig again the wells of our Fathers.

“Words do not contain the truth, they point to it and evoke it.” 19.

The winter is the season when things seem dead, but they are not.

“Humans grow angry so easily, so heedlessly venting their anger at those nearest and most vulnerable, needlessly, wantonly injuring what is most precious and most fragile.”86.

“Humans are not only humans, moral subjects and vital organisms. They are also *Persons*, capable of fusing eternity and time in the precious, anguished reality of a love that would be eternal amid the concreteness of time. A person is a being through whom eternity enters time.” 121.

We are as insensitive to history as we are to nature, 159.

There is self-discovery in remembrance.

“The echo of a word of the Lord not yet spoken.”

“How can humans live with what they can neither accept nor escape?” 162

We have a sense of history. But we have lost a sense of eternity.

“European thought has been profoundly affected by collapsing into each other two dimensions of being human which humans had long treated as distinct: the line of temporal progression, from before to after, and the line of moral judgment, between good and evil. Whatever else may be true of it, ours is a time for which later has acquired a sense of better—while better has been drained of all meaning except that of later.” 164

The authentic relation between beings is the personal encounter of mutual respect.  
208

Most of the time we possess and covet far more than we can care for and cherish. 212

Generosity personalizes as greed depersonalizes.

Wear it in, wear it out, make it do or do without.

We need to rediscover ourselves as persons, not as need gratifying organisms. 215

Havel: “To Live In Truth.”

“Their great achievement is that, before all eternity, they have spoken the word of truth in time.”

“The chief task of philosophy is to write footnotes to the text of experience.” 219

*January 10*

## Four-part Harmony

So, this morning, as Jesus greets the children, we hear four voices, a choral harmony. Here is the light lead voice, the soprano melody, the remaining fragrant essence of Jesus of Nazareth, who suffered the children to come to him. Here is the strong formative voice, the alto and most important voice, that of the primitive church, which remembered Jesus, remembered his word, but remembered in way that was formed in their own life, out of their own need, the need to address the community needs of children. Here is the tenor voice, that of the writer, Mark, who places this passage among others of similar type, others related to the needs of the community. Here is the baritone voice of the church, remembering and re-rendering this same gospel text, for two thousand years, beginning with Matthew and Luke, twenty years after Mark.

*January 11*

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## Genuine Generosity

The eye of the Lord today rests for a moment upon a genuine generosity. If we follow his gaze our eyes too may rest for a moment upon genuine generosity. We too by the lenses of the Scripture may for a moment see what Jesus sees, imagine what he imagines, today. His vision may shape our own. Then in his light we may see light. Follow in the mind's eye for a moment the angle of vision, the dominical angle of vision, now registered for us and all time in St. Luke's generous gospel, Chapter 13. Hum the tune, some months before Christmastide: Do you see what he sees. In water on the Sabbath, simple refreshment of those who emerge from the manger, he sees and honors genuine generosity. Can we do otherwise? The next time you are tempted, as you consider a generous act, to think that no one sees, that no one shares, that no fruit falls, remember today's gospel of water on the Sabbath. Follow the eye of the Lord, resting for a moment today on generosity. He teaches us about visible generosity. He delights us with religious generosity. He persuades us of the power of generosity.

*January 12*

## Hope and Pam Brush

In 1985 Jan and I were assigned to a city church nearby a large nominally Methodist university. On the first Sunday, in a building with 50 rooms, whose sanctuary seated 600, there were 35 people, all but two of whom would be dead before we moved. A grand, once great pulpit. Here is the church. Where are the people? We noticed that fall an article in the student newspaper: 6,000 students were living in our neighborhood, said the article. So we planned and worked, we advertised a Sunday evening student dinner, we passed the word, beat the drum, fanned the flames, and went to the highways and byways. We cleaned one of those 50 rooms, cooked a turkey dinner, and sat down to wait. You know the feeling. 5:45, no one. 6:00, no one came. 6:05, no one. We were about to close up, when, at 6:10, in walked one woman, Pam Brush. She had seen the notice. She had grown up in the Methodist church on Long Island. She was a sophomore. She thought maybe she'd check out the neighborhood church.

She did not say any of the following: "where is everybody, am I the only one, who else is coming, is this the right place?" Here is what she said: "wow, thanks for the meal, this tastes great, I love turkey, tell me about the two of you, what is there to do in Syracuse, I love this old building, is it haunted, next week I'm bringing my two roommates and their boyfriends, we'll cook, I wish I had a boyfriend, maybe I will by next week, what a great place . . . see you next Sunday!" And out of that one lone child, one lone woman, one lone person on the periphery, over a decade, there grew a Sunday dinner fellowship, the Wesley fellowship, a house and half time ministry and minister, seasonal retreats, a newsletter: *The Epworth News*, service work, fun, fellowship. In the snow some years later, Jan and I slid our way down to Long Island to officiate at Pam's wedding. It is emotionally draining and even painful to remember this, to remember who we are, and what can happen, where Christ is.

To remember Pam Brush in 1985 is to remember that I am a child of God. You too.

*January 13*

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## Thurman

Maybe we need to remember Howard Thurman. The first page of his autobiography announces today's gospel, that Jesus empowers his disciples, whose vocations lead to God:

At the end of my first year at the Rochester Theological Seminary, I became assistant to the minister of the First Baptist Church of Roanoke, Virginia. I was to assume the duties as pastor during the month that the minister and his family were away on vacation. I would be on my own. On my first night alone in the parsonage I was awakened by the telephone. The head nurse of the local Negro hospital asked, "May I speak with Dr. James?" I told her he was away. "Dr. James is the hospital chaplain," she explained. "There is a patient here who is dying. He is asking for a minister. Are you a minister?"

In one kaleidoscopic moment I was back again at an old crossroad. A decision of vocation was to be made here, and I felt again the ambivalence of my life and my calling. Finally, I answered. "Yes, I am a minister."

"Please hurry," she said, "or you'll be too late."

In a few minutes I was on my way, but in my excitement and confusion I forgot to take my Bible. At the hospital, the nurse took me immediately into a large ward. The dread curtain was around the bed. She pulled it aside and directed me to stand opposite her. The sick man's eyes were half closed, his mouth open, his breathing labored. The nurse leaned over and, calling him by name, said, "The minister is here."

Slowly he sought to focus his eyes first on her, and then on me. In a barely audible voice he said, "Do you have something to say to a man who is dying? If you have, please say it, and say it in a hurry."

I bowed my head, closed my eyes. There were no words. I poured out the anguish of my desperation in one vast effort. I felt physically I was straining to reach God. At last, I whispered my Amen.

We opened our eyes simultaneously as he breathed, "Thank you. I understand." He died with his hand in mine.<sup>1</sup>

Vocation leads to God.

*January 14*

1. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (Orlando: Mariner, 1979), 3-4.

## I bear witness.

In June I preached in Baltimore, in the fine facility of the Baltimore Marriott Waterfront Hotel. A thousand well quaffed, fashion edged, nicely attired Christians, in black and white, United Methodists, filled the lush ballroom. The next morning we drove north to Scranton PA, to the last full session of the so-called Wyoming Conference. 300 overweight, poorly dressed, all white, largely retirees, met in the unkempt gymnasium of the University of Scranton. Like Solomon's baby, the conference is to be cut in two pieces this year. From southern waterfront to northern wasteland we drove in one morning. In religion, the south has surely risen again. In Scranton, most of the delegates were too old and too heavy to walk from the gym to the cafeteria, less than 300 yards. Golf carts carried the disciples. The ice is melting. Fast.

I bear witness.

I attended my home conference, my spiritual home. As an itinerant preacher, a traveling elder, my church is the gathering of similarly cast about travelers, my conference. My brothers in ministry, my sisters in itinerancy. Hymns to sing. My life goes on in endless song . . . I drove to Clarence Center, near Buffalo, thinking about the plane crash last winter which put the little town on the map. My dark reverie was shaken as I passed a church sign which read: "True peace is found only through Jesus Christ." I do not believe that. Neither do you. Re-read Romans 8 again about the whole creation groaning if you must. Read Acts 10 about all in their own way being saved if you must. Re-read Galatians 3:26 about the end of religious distinctions if you must. Channel John Wesley—if thine heart be as mine then give me thine hand—if you must. Re-read any of Huston Smith's books if you must. Remember Abraham Heschel. Remember Anwar Sadat. Remember Abraham Lincoln. Remember Mahatma Gandhi. Recall the Dalai Lama, if you must. *But must you?* We are not Christofascists, are we? We know in our bones that there are many ways of keeping faith. We know in our guts that in the Father's house there are many rooms. We know in our hearts that the true light that enlightens *every one* has come into the world. Don't we?

I drove on, glad to be arriving at a *magnanimous Methodist* conference wherein there is no east or west, wherein no south or north, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth, wherein there is broad peace, peace perfect peace, wherein Wesley is remembered, and remembered to have said, "if thine heart be as mine, give me thine hand." *No.* Not for you, not for us the holier than thou neo-gnostic Unitarianism of the second person of the Trinity, patronizingly triumphalistic, christofascist, exclusivist hatred of such a saying: "True peace is found only in Jesus Christ." *No.*

But. As you probably already surmise, in the rear view mirror, and beneath the afore-quoted warped proverb, I cringed and wept to read the church's name, Harris Hill United Methodist Church. And. As you may now guess, at the conference itself the opening sermon, an atrocity, gave more than ample cover to such christomonist religious one-up-man ship.

I will try to bear witness.

*January 15*

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## I Will Be With You: Irving G Hill, 1953

One balmy spring evening, in the early fifties, I was returning to our apartment at 17 Yarmouth Street in Boston. I had just spend the last two hours in the world of a John Wayne Western. This American genre where right always succeeds and you know the outcome before the film begins. You don't have to think you just allow yourself to be immersed in this world of dreams.

Then, as I walked across Huntington Avenue, I looked to my left and saw the lighted dome of the Christian Science Mother Church. I had seen it many times before. I had taken our youth fellowship there to visit and walk through the giant globe that is there. But this evening as I made that familiar crossing I was struck, not by an auto, but by the reality that in just a few days I would receive my theological degree and become the pastor of the Brewerton Methodist Church.

How could this be? What was I to do? I was only 24 years old. I had never dealt with death except I in theory. I had never sat with a couple after the death of a child. I had never counseled a couple preparing for marriage except in a classroom setting. To my recollection I had never spoken with a person who had no belief in God or saw any reason for one. I had never thought how a church budget was raised or more significantly how my salary would be paid. In a few days, I would be facing all of these things and more.

I recalled a conversation that occurred at the just past annual conference with a committee from the Brewerton church. One of the saints said to me, "Young man, if you get a better offer, you had better take it, I don't know how we will be able to pay your salary." How about that?

Now, I had grown up in the church, attended church school, taught church school. I had been active in the youth fellowship at the local level and the conference level. Marcia and I had spent one summer as life guards at Casowasco. But now I was to be the pastor of a church in a community that I had only driven through.

Of course, I had graduated from a Methodist related university and had the privilege of studying at one of the better theological schools for three years, but on that June evening in the middle of that empty thoroughfare, I was totally lost.

Then I heard, "You don't think you are going to do this all by yourself do you? Surely I will be with you."

I heard that voice as clearly as I have ever heard anything and it has remained with me for these past 53 years.

It has taken the form of a loving, supportive wife, a devoted family, dedicated and crate lay people, inspired bishops, superintendents, and brother and sister clergy. Group commanders, wing chaplains and people of God, just like you.

*January 16*

## Addams

Maybe we need to remember the young woman from Rockford Illinois, Jane Addams. She grew up 130 years ago, in a time and place unfriendly, even hostile, to the leadership that women might provide. But somehow she discovered her mission in life. And with determination she traveled to the windy city and set up Hull House, the most far reaching experiment in social reform that American cities had ever seen. Hull House was born out of a social vision, and nurtured through the generosity of one determined woman. Addams believed fervently that we are responsible for what happens in the world. So Hull House, a place of feminine community and exciting spiritual energy, was born. Addams organized female labor unions. She lobbied for a state office to inspect factories for safety. She built public playgrounds and staged concerts and cared for immigrants. She became politically active and gained a national following on the lecture circuit. She is perhaps the most passionate and most effective advocate for the poor that our country has ever seen.

Addams wrote: "The blessings which we associate with a life of refinement and cultivation must be made universal if they are to be permanent . . . The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain, is floating in midair, until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life."

Yet it was a Rochesterian who, for me, explained once the puzzle of Jane Addams' fruitful generosity. This was the historian Christopher Lasch. Several times in the 1980's I thought of driving over here to visit him. But I never took the time, and as you know, he died seven years ago. Lasch said of Addams, "Like so many reformers before her, she had discovered some part of herself which, released, freed the rest."

Is there a part of your soul ready today to be released, that then will free the rest of you?

Vocation leads to God.

*January 17*



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# Marsh Chapel

## 9/11 Memorial Service 2006

### Meditation on Peace

Today we pause in prayer and quiet to honor those who lost their lives 5 years ago, and those who lost loved ones the same day. We meet this moment, in quiet, to honor and remember. In doing so we do not neglect, we do not forget, we do not side-step, those who have lost life and loved ones since. In service of God and neighbor, in service of God and country, in Tsunami and hurricane and disease, we remember those who have been hurt, in a world of hurt.

Rightly to honor those lost and those loved, and fitly to meet this moment, we shall need briefly to look out toward the far side of trouble. There is, we hope, a far side to trouble. We may watch from the near side, but there is a far side to trouble as well. That is our ancient and future hope. Dewey spoke of a common faith. Thurman preached about a common ground. Today we identify a common hope.

This is the hope of peace. We long for the far side of trouble, for a global community of steady interaction, an international fellowship of accommodation, a world together dedicated to softening the inevitable collisions of life. This is the hope of peace.

Without putting too fine a point upon it, this hope, the vision of the far side of trouble, is the hallmark of the space in which we stand, and the place before which we stand. If nowhere else, here on this plaza, and here before this nave, we may lift our prayer of hope. There is a story here, of peace.

Methodists are like everyone else, only more so, the saying goes—a wide and diffuse denomination, committed to a handshake and a song, and that shared ‘creed’ of “that which has been believed, always, everywhere, and by everyone” (so, John Wesley).

Mahatmas Ghandi, walking and singing ‘Lead Kindly Light,’ embodied this common hope. Ghandi wrote: “I am part and parcel of the whole, and cannot find God apart from the rest of humanity.” A common hope of peace. Ghandi inspired and taught the earlier Dean of Marsh Chapel, Howard Thurman.

Howard Thurman, hands raised in silence, later wrote: “The events of my days strike a full balance of what seems both good and bad. Whatever may be the tensions and the stresses of a particular day, there is always lurking close at hand the trailing beauty of forgotten joy or unremembered peace.” A common hope of peace.

Thurman taught King, whose stentorian voice fills our memory and whose sculpture adorns our village green. King wrote: “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.” A common hope of peace. Martin Luther King inspired a whole generation of ministers, including the current Dean of this Chapel.

He (Robert Allan Hill) wrote: “We are all more human and more alike than we regularly affirm, all of us on this great globe. We all survive the birth canal, and so have a native

CHARLES RIVER

survivors' guilt. All six billion. We all need daily two things, bread and a name. (One does not live by bread alone). All six billion. We all grow to a point of separation, a leaving home, a second identity. All six billion. We all love our families, love our children, love our homes, love our grandchildren. All six billion. We all age, and after forty, its maintenance, maintenance, maintenance. All six billion. We all shuffle off this mortal coil en route to that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns. All six billion."

Today, in memory and honor, we lift our hope for a day to live on the far side of trouble. We remember our ancient and future hope, a hope of peace.

*January 18*

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## Odd Experience

Recently a reporter traveled to Alaska. The reporter followed a trail of news, stemming from the announcement that in several Alaskan cities, there lived an abundance of young single men, and a paucity of young single women. An eager editor, seizing a summer moment, sent off his dutiful scribe, to interview the Northern Lights. As I recall, the reporter did confirm the statistical imbalance, far more women than men. 3 men for every woman. 3 to 1. What made the article memorable, however, was a more insightful quotation, with which the report concluded. The reporter interviewed a young woman at a bar, and asked her perspective on this statistical imbalance. "Well," the woman replied. "yes, it is true, look around you, yes, the ratio is heavily weighted. The men outnumber the women. There are something like two three men for every woman. You could say that the odds are good, if you are looking for a relationship. The odds, yes, the odds are good . . . but, on the other hand, again, look around you, the odds are good, but . . . though the odds are good . . . the goods are odd!"

Her experience changed her outlook, modified her perspective, qualified her inherited idea.

*January 19*

## Our Help

D: Whence cometh our help?

S: From the Lord who made heaven and earth. The Creator. The Ground of Being. The God beyond God. The invisible, unknowable, unutterable, unattainable. The first, the last beyond all thought. The Transcendent.

D: What is the point of our lives?

S: To worship God and glorify God forever.

D: How is this possible, in the face of silence, darkness, mystery, accident, pride, immaturity, tragedy and the threat of meaninglessness?

S: By walking in the dark with our Transforming Friend, the Transcript in Time of who God is in eternity, the gift of the Father's unfailing grace, our beacon not our boundary, the presence of the absence of God, Jesus Christ our Kyrios.

D: Given our failures, our gone-wrongness, our sin, what daily hope have we, as those who hope for what we do not see?

S: Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Where there is freedom, there is promise. There is a self-correcting Spirit of Truth loose in the universe. There is a self-correcting Spirit of Truth loose in the universe.

D: How do we follow the trail of the Spirit?

S: By tithing, by ordered Sunday worship, by honest faithfulness in our relationships.

*January 20*

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## Public Speaking 101: A Sketch of a Speech

### Personal Introduction

Confident Speech: Awareness, Setting, Attire, Delivery, Diction, Ease, Smile, Make others comfortable, Eye Contact, Lift Voice at End of Sentences, "Please Speak Slowly and Distinctly," Good humor, Daniel Marsh, "Good Friends All." Psalm 100.

Clear Speech: 1. Delivery: Audible, Precise, Enough Volume (more than you think). 2. Content: Diamond Point, Some Structure (A story? An image? An argument? A stream?). Three parts. Use Repetition. Third President: Merlin: heart, service. Frost: Road Not Taken

Concise Speech: Be clear, be brief, be seated. Consider the hearer. Eulogies for Adam Robert Engel at Hillel Monday night. KISS. Lincoln, Gettysburg. Brown: "One BU." Shakespeare 66 Sonnet. 10,000 hours.

For example: Say your name, with confident, clear, concise speech, telling us one thing about your name that we would not know.

*January 21*

## Resurrection Light

Friends, resurrection comes from the religion Joanna and others carry with them to the tomb. Resurrection comes from Judaism, and from a particular hope in Judaism, an apocalyptic hope. In the range of religious reality available, to Jesus and Paul and Luke and all, the cosmic apocalyptic hope of resurrection, when the dead would be redeemed from graves, was the nearest best idiom available to say this: Why do you seek the Living One among the dead?

Resurrection from the dead comes from Jewish apocalyptic. It explains, interprets an experience, namely the appearance of Jesus to his disciples. He showed himself. “Resurrection is a reflective interpretation of encounters with the Living One which had the power to convince, to generate new community, to establish authorized leadership, and to commit to mission.”

As George Buttrick, across the river years ago, said, “resurrection is the lifting of personal life into a new dimension of light and power . . . not . . . retrogression from the vivid personal into the vague and abstract impersonal . . . the inner evidence is the structure of our personal life; the outer evidence, meeting the inner evidence as light meets the eye, is in Jesus Christ . . . faith . . . beckoning, always freedom for our choosing and response . . . he showed himself to those who loved him . . . by hint and gleam, lest we be coerced.”<sup>1</sup>

Resurrection Light uncovers humility.

Christ is Risen! Indeed.

*January 22*

1. George Buttrick, *Sermons From A University Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959), 176.

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## Retreat Devotion Outline

Psalm  
Moment of Silence  
A Word of Wonder  
Moment of Silence  
A Word of Vulnerability  
Moment of Silence  
A Word of Self-Awareness  
Moment of Silence  
Hymn  
Exhortation

*January 23*

## Salt and Light

To this service of ordered worship, in cantata and sermon, we welcome all. . .  
For salt and light we bring learning, virtue and piety  
With salt and light we become a heart for the heart of the city, a service in the service  
of the city  
As salt and light, we lift our voice around the globe, discern our vocation in the heart  
and expand the volume of the Marsh Chapel community  
With sisters and brothers in other traditions, traditions ancient and global, we share a  
longing for atonement and a need of compunction.  
A humble contrition, here is today's salt.  
A contrite humility, here is today's light.  
Let us lift our hearts in personal and collective confession.  
You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Peace, perfect peace, the  
peace of pardon and joy, be upon you.

*January 24*



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## Steeple Jack

Before you work high you build a scaffold to get yourself up there.

Steeple Jacks do not use a scaffold. They use rope and pulleys, and they rightly earn many hundreds of dollars an hour. As one said to me, quoting Scripture, and speaking of the dangers of height, “Jesus said, ‘Lo(w) I am with you.’” Meaning, he continued, “up high you are on your own.”

Our first and smaller churches, some five of them, hired Steeple Jacks for the minor tilting, shingling, painting and other repairs required of small church steeples on small steeple churches. One was squat enough (the church I mean not the Jack) that he could go up by ladder. Our sixth church (and the seventh, too) was a “tall steeple church.” The trustees tried to get by with a Steeple Jack, every time repairs were needed, but most times, no, they needed to spend more. Once a two hundred pound section of copper plate fell off that steeple onto a University neighborhood street. Exposure, liability, act of God, randomness—these words appeared in sermons later that month. No one was hurt. Scaffolding went up the next week, and stayed up for several expensive days.

The interior space of churches also requires endless attention. As with care of the human body after the age of forty, the motto for sanctuary care must be “maintenance, maintenance, maintenance.” Interior scaffolding also comes at a price. Sure you prefer to change light bulbs and paint ceilings with a huge step ladder and a fearless Trustee or hired painter. Sure. But the higher the nave, the, well, I refer you to adage above. “Lo I am with you.” Not high.

Even before any paint is spilled, and even before any long lasting bulbs are replaced, there is work, there is cost, there is meaningful preparation.

So it is, as you know, in preaching. The interpreter either swings in the breeze like a Steeple Jack, if the matters of historical interpretation are low fences (Paul’s letters come to mind), or, if the height is greater, scaffolding is needed (the Hebrew Scripture, all the Gospels, and especially the Gospel of John come to mind). What you see when the work is done, is the steeple repaired, the roof replaced, the paint (both coats) applied, the bulbs changed. But before that there has been scaffolding up, so that the work could be done.

*January 25*

## The Importance of Condolence: Letters Received at a Time of Loss

Dear Bob,

At this time you are either at your father's funeral or the burial. I am with you in spirit and prayer. This morning when I was meditating upon you and your relationship with your father I got to reflecting upon how your loss includes the loss of the world that only you and he had together, common understandings and experiences that only a son and father can have, common perceptions, beliefs, and knowings that go beyond words that bound the two of you together. Now that world, which I believe is eternal, is held in this life by your mind and soul, a place where your father continues to speak to you in the silence and essence of his being. I believe that world has an existence beyond this life where he holds you in his eternal soul, the soul that is also the Soul of God where God holds the two of you and your special world. I give thanks for that world knowing it is sacred and so very special. That world has nurtured my world and the world of creation. While you grieve the loss of being with your father in your earthly life, you know better than I that you and he will always be together and nothing, not even death, can destroy that. Thanks be to God and to his Son, Jesus, our Christ.

"About a week after Mary Elizabeth circulated an email informing us of your father's passing, I bought this card. For various reasons, certainly some not known by me, I 'forgot' to write. Some of it has to do with my own grieving (my mother died the day after Christmas, my father died a few years ago—and I've actually repressed the year). However old we get, we will always be the child of our parents, and the memories will appear out of nowhere—some welcome, others not. I hope your mourning unfolds well. I hope the images, thoughts, and feelings that arise unbidden connect you with your father, and even if shaken in this moment, you can smile knowing he's there with you."

"I can't quite express my feelings about your loss. Irving was such a huge influence on so many of us—we all grieve with you."

"Our heartfelt condolences on the death of your father. Our thoughts and prayers have been with you. Around 1476 the Spanish Poet Jorge Manrique expressed his sentiments upon his father's death in a poem entitled 'Coplas por la muerte de su padre,' the famous elegy written in the Spanish language. Manrique reminds us not only of the brevity of life but the comfort that comes from knowing his father had lived an exemplary life and moved from time to eternity . . .

*Nuestros vidos son los rios  
Que van a dar en la mar  
Que es el morir  
Que querer hombre vivir  
Cuando Dios quiere que muera*

JANUARY

*Es locura  
Que aunque la vida perdio  
No dejo harto Consuelo su memoria.*

*January 26*

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## The Technological Society

When you walk down Commonwealth Avenue, make a rough count of the number of people who pass you and are talking on cell phones, texting on Blackberries, or are ear-wired for music. One of the real joys of being alive is the chance to walk, and to watch and look and listen to all that may be alive around you. On such a walk, Jesus met a woman at a well, and made her well. On such a walk, down from Jerusalem to Jericho, a Samaritan saw and helped a man who had fallen among thieves. On such a walk, near Emmaus, the disciples encountered the Risen Christ. On such a walk, outside Damascus (today such a tumultuous city), Paul of Tarsus was blinded, thunderously addressed, and made into a new person. On such a walk, Francis of Assisi crisscrossed Europe and left behind his riches. On such a walk, Marco Polo found China. On such a walk, Isaac Newton saw an apple fall from a tree, and imagined gravity. On such a walk, Benjamin Franklin studied lightning, and later captured electricity. On such a walk, Robert Frost found two roads that diverged. On such a walk, the original San Francisco 49'r discovered gold in those western hills. On such a walk, Johnnie Appleseed filled the country with apple blossoms and apple trees. On such a walk, Martin Luther King changed Birmingham, and so the country. On such a walk, Winston Churchill decided that Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, is the most beautiful in America.

Here is a word of caution from Jacques Ellul: "Technology has two consequences which strike me as the most profound in our time. I call them the suppression of the subject and the suppression of meaning. . . The suppression of the subject is transforming traditional human relations, which require the voice, which require seeing, or which require a physical relationship between one human being and the next. The result is the distant relationship . . . the suppression of meaning: the ends of existence gradually seem to be effaced by the predominance of means . . . the meaning of existence of 'why I am alive' is suppressed as technology so vastly develops its power."<sup>1</sup>

*January 27*

1. Jacques Ellul *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on his Life and Work* (Seabury Press, 1981) 51.

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## Whimsy

A man driving across Ireland had car trouble. He emerged from behind the wheel and could see no one, only a horse. Suddenly the horse leaned over the fence and said, "Open the hood, and let me have a look." "You are a talking horse?" "Yes. Clean the gaskets and retry the ignition." The car purred, and off the man drove, terrified. He stopped in a bar to calm his nerves with a drink. "You look terrible said the barkeep. What happened to you?" "You won't believe it. My car broke down. Then a horse came to me and spoke, and fixed my car." "Really? What color was the horse?" "Black. Why?" "Well, you were lucky. There is white horse over there, too. But he doesn't know anything about car mechanics."

*January 28*

## A Sketch on Writing for the Ear<sup>1</sup>

- The test of good writing is permanence, the test of good speech is immediacy.
- Sentences: short and clear; words: familiar and plain.
- Churchill, Roosevelt, Shakespeare, King, (Cuomo).
- The preacher must hear how the words sound.
- Use as few words as possible (Laconic).
- Use words that sound well together (paralysis of analysis, perky jerky).
- Short, strong, clear, familiar words (Anglo Saxon, not Latin).
- Sensuous not abstract, specific not general (not flowers, apple blossoms; not great poets, John Milton; not suffering, blood toil tears sweat “the Bible was the weapon of our souls.”)
- Sentences, sometimes long (Lincoln).
- Paragraph, or though (move?) more important than sentence.
- The ear is far more tolerant of repetition, reiteration.
- Every sentence has two positions of strength, beginning and end.

You will not acquire mastery of words and sentences by reading about them. You will take them captive by practice.

*January 29*

1. H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 265.

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## Young Man Jesus

Jesus meets us today in the Word. He greets us. He greets us a real human being, fully human.

How shall we say this, today?

You know, for a long time, people have been trying to say the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, about Jesus.

To an unruly church, Matthew said: "Hold it. Jesus was a teacher."

To a suffering church, Mark said: "Remember. Jesus was crucified. He suffered too."

To a settled, more comfortable church, Luke said: "Wait a minute. Jesus loved the poor, those outside."

To a philosophical church, John said: "Stop. God's word became flesh and dwelt among us."

You know, for a long time, groups of people have been trying to say the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, about Jesus.

In 1848, over in Seneca Falls, Jesus was well remembered as an advocate for, a friend of women.

In 1862, in the autumn, as Lincoln pondered the Emancipation Proclamation, Jesus would have been remembered as a person of color, semitic, dark, today we would say black.

In 1933, the only thing worth saying in Berlin and Tübingen about Jesus was that he was a Jew. In fact, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said then that the Christian church in Germany either would be found standing next to for and up for the Jewish community or it did not exist at all.

And today?

Humans have always had problems with Jesus' humanity. The rude manger, innocent and innocuous, we can accept. The empty tomb, divine power and victory, we can accept. It is what lies between Christmas and Easter that is harder for us.

On October 24, 2010, at Boston University Marsh Chapel, amid 4400 freshmen and women, and 40,000 people in a community of learning, what shall we say about the humanity of Jesus?

Just this: He lived and died a *young* man. So he is, as a classmate once wrote, "perpetually ripe."

*January 30*

## Can We Afford It?: Irving G. Hill

From my earliest memory  
The question has been  
'Can we afford it?'  
When I wanted a bicycle, I asked  
'Can we afford it?'

My mom said 'no.'  
But,  
We did!

When the American Youth Hostel recruited me for a work project  
In Europe in 1946  
'Could we afford it?'  
No!  
But I went.

When it came time for me to go to college,  
'Could we afford it?'  
No!  
But I graduated from Syracuse University.

My future father in law asked, 'could I afford to marry  
His daughter?'  
'Weeeel. . .' I answered  
But we got married!

Confronted with a growing family  
And a month's vacation, we needed  
A summer retreat!  
'Could we afford it?'  
No!  
But somehow we did!

After thirty nine years of the Traveling Ministry  
At age sixty-two  
'could we afford to retire?'  
No  
Was the answer.  
But I did retire!



When it became necessary to purchase a residence  
The answer this time was  
Yes  
With a lot of help!

The next great adventure we face is death.  
Can we afford it?  
Not willingly, not willingly,  
But by faith we will!

*January 31*