



# ***REFLECTIONS***

*March 5, 2023*

**Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.**

*Deuteronomy 4:9*

## **So Many Pictures**

So many moments in time captured in them that stir memories of people, and places that in some small way became a part of who I have become. Now it's time to sort through them all in search of those snapshots that when placed side by side will summarize the stories behind the scenes that reveal something of who I am.

So many pictures. The task is to distill them down to a few that tell who the people were, where they lived, and how they shaped a part of who I am and where I live.

Until now I didn't know how to do that. Or maybe I just didn't want to take the time or make the mess on the floor it will make. Or maybe I didn't want to live those memories again because of something there I wanted to forget or of something I long to live over again but can't. But I know how to do it now. And I must do it or allow death of the memories they portray.

Besides, those snapshots may still hide some clues of who I am and where God is leading me. And they may contain clues that will tell coming generations who they are, the depth of their roots, and the source of the Christian values they live by. Perhaps also, they may discover the reason they think the way they do, and the image of the past they represent. So maybe it's time to ensure those memories will live on.

So many pictures. So many stories with so many memories.

I wonder where they might lead.

*You are the light of the world,*

*Richard +*

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# REFLECTIONS

February 26, 2023

**You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last.**

*John 15:16*

## Darkness

About those bulbs recently potted with their tips of life peeking just above the soil, something is different about them today. By day when all can see them, they seem static in their state; but strangely the next day, when morning comes, they stand just a little taller than the day before. Something about the shadow of night seemed to have changed them—something we couldn't see happen in the light of day.

Perhaps those pods undressed themselves in the privacy of the darkness with their nakedness concealed from sight. Or maybe when darkness fell, they stretched themselves a little more in search of the light. But whatever the cause, darkness seemed to help them grow.

Shadows befall us all. Darkness closes our eyes for a while. It's when we sleep; it's also when we grow. Well, it's not so much that we grow in darkness, but things seem to grow more when they're not seen or at least not watched. Then, when light awakens the new day, we see something is a little bit bigger.

There's lots going on around us that we don't see. *Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.* (Luke 2:52) But likely, Mary and Joseph didn't see what was happening even as they watched their son develop. Darkness keeps us out of sight while we grow. When the Light shines on the changes time has made, we bloom. Blooms turn into fruit. Hidden within them, seeds of new life await their own planting season. Those seeds become our legacy to this world.

Live life well. *Bear fruit—fruit that will last.* The valley of the shadow of death looms ahead. It's the walk we all must make. When we emerge from it, we will have grown more than just a bit. And we become a fragrant bloom in the garden God prepared for us before the creation of the world. It's the garden we always longed to find.

It's called Home.

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# REFLECTIONS

February 19, 2023

**Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.**

*John 15:13*

## **Friends** *(Adapted from the Archives of February 3, 2013)*

God blesses life with companions whose lives cross paths for a time to share the joys and pains that come along the way. Companions are plentiful during the journey, but friends are few. *“Friends stick closer than a brother,”* the scripture says.<sup>1</sup> Friends know each other from the inside out—and they love each other anyway. That’s what friends do.

Friends are those who come alongside during times when others may stand in judgment. Friends are there to give warning when a wrong path has been chosen, and to encourage when disappointment rears its head. They are there to grieve in times of sorrow and they are there to celebrate when victories come. Friends walk the path with one another, in good times and through troubled ones.

Friends have enriched my life. They are witnesses who have seen beyond the façade I portray and into the frailties I try to hide. And they love me anyway. Friends are blessings to have, and a calling to become. And there is one friend who set the standard.

Jesus is a friend to all who seek him. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows the motives behind our actions when we can’t admit them even to ourselves. He hears our thoughts even if we don’t say them. He feels our emotions even when we conceal them. Jesus said this about friends: *“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”* And even with all our frailties—that’s what Jesus did.

My prayer today is to be a friend like Jesus, to be there in good times and bad, to take the hand that reaches out, and to share the joy when blessings come. I think maybe that’s what Jesus meant when He asked us to, *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 18:24

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# REFLECTIONS

February 12, 2023

**Jesus wept.**

*John 11:35*

## Loss

It's another difficult emotion to confront in the journey through this world. We lose things as we travel through this world. I still remember the most cherished thing I lost as a child.

My uncle Richard Stanton was a P-38 pilot in the army air force who lost his life in the Pacific theater of World War II. The only thing I had to remember him by was a collar pin that designated the wings of a pilot. I took it to school one day to show it off. The pin didn't make it home with me. Lost forever. I cried and cried. Even as I write of that loss, I relive the misery of that day. I was only 8-years old and that pin was only a thing.

More deeply, I remember the loss of Grandpappy, my maternal grandfather. He was the first of my loved ones I remember losing. It really stung. Tears could not be controlled, but neither did they offer relief from my grief. I was barely 13.

Five and a half years later, I lost Pawpaw. I thought I was prepared for that one, after all I was well into my 18<sup>th</sup> year.

Tears, even in their floods, couldn't relieve my anguish when I saw his lifeless body in the casket; nor did they sooth the depth of my loss as I watched from the car while parades of men emerged from the church. They had come to pay tribute to the man who stood so tall in my life. I bawled uncontrolled when I realized those men were there because my Pawpaw stood tall in their lives too.

Many more of my heroes and friends have passed from my life since then—each one a painful loss. But they all found their place in the joy life has blessed me with. Individually and together, they became a part of who I am. They were instruments of God used to shape me into who He intended me to be.

Grief lingers on until, in good time, it becomes an inspiration. A loss grieved for becomes a purpose lived for. Something about someone who once journeyed with me in life became a cause to carry on. Be it as simple as a caring face in troubling times or a massive movement for a worthy cause, something of them lives on through me.

Isn't it amazing how God shapes our lives that way.

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# REFLECTIONS

February 5, 2023

**but those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.**

*Isaiah 40:31*

## Flying Against the Wind

Okay. I confess. The subject today wasn't born from my own thoughts. Rather, today's *Reflections* is inspired by a day's reading from *Streams in the Desert* by L.B. Conway. But the verse it drew me to is not the one she referenced. Isaiah 40:31 is more familiar to me.

Aerodynamics is at the core of her message. "The wings of the airplane create more lift by flying against the wind," she writes. Her analogy means that God isn't working against us with those troubles we face. He faces us against them to strengthen us and to lift us up more quickly above them than we would by not facing them.

Oh! And here's another familiar verse to recall when those troubles in blow against you:

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
in all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make your paths straight.*

(Proverbs 3:5-6)

Can't you imagine that the Wright brothers had placed their trust in the Lord before the wind lifted their wings on their historic day.

But when trials try to block our way, there is still another passage to remember:

*...weeping may remain for a night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning...  
You turned my wailing into dancing;  
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,  
that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.  
O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.*

(Psalms 30:5, 11-12)

In case you're wondering what verse L.B. Conway chose to make her point about flying against the wind, it's Isaiah 58:14: *and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land.*

Here's the sum of it all: *be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.* (Psalms 27:14)

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# REFLECTIONS

January 29, 2023

**"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful..."**

*John 15:1-2*

## Pruned

Did you ever notice that some plants in the garden require more attention; or that some places in the lawn require more care? Without extra attention, the plant may bloom a little anyway, and the grass may grow but with less color and strength. But without more attention neither of them flourishes the way God intended.

Something I read recently drew me to this passage I have ignored too often in my prayers: *I am the vine; you are the branches*. The Gardener singles out and cuts away all that does not bear fruit. And those that do bear fruit He prunes so they will bear more fruit.

Pruning season is tough. The Gardner turns the attention of his pruning shears to you and cuts away even some of your most cherished fruit bearing parts. Your soul screams out in agony. Your fingernails clutch to what you know, and your eyes fixate on what has been. You feel naked and exposed. But when the wounds heal, the Gardner reshaped who you were into more than you ever dreamed.

*For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."* (Jeremiah 29:11) The blossoms you bring to life will flourish. It's the way your life carries on—not in breath or human touch, but through fruit borne from you, soil nourished by you, and influence left from the life you lived.

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# REFLECTIONS

January 22, 2023

**I praise you because I am fearfully and  
wonderfully made;**

*Psalm 139:14*

## The Invisible Ordinary

They are always there, those ordinary things, but drawing little status because of it. Sometimes, if you are like me, we feel ordinary ourselves, as common as the ground or as the people constitute a crowd. And I'm drawn back to the *Reflections* from May 5, 2013, where the subject was *A Solitary Leaf*.

When something so ordinary feathered gracefully from an overhanging tree onto the stillness of a lonely pond, its ripples broadcast no sound. Then it drifted around for a while before sinking beneath the pond's surface as quietly as it came. Its presence in this world seemed to have no lasting effect at all. Or was there?

Like that solitary leaf, the man with the bush of curly red hair seemed ordinary too until he poured out his suffering from believing himself to be an object of God's wrath. His feelings weren't ordinary, nor in my eyes was he any longer. Without knowing more, I imagined guilt and shame buried within him, his self-image shaped into unworthiness at best, but perhaps even hopelessness. Then, not only did his self-image shape his perspective of life, but knowledge of his suffering also reshaped mine.

But what if he hadn't shared his pain with us? Would his story remain blended into the invisible ordinary? Or might we do well to single out each of those ordinary things around us in search of a story within them? Then as we do, relate the imaginary story in your mind to the influence *you* might have on those around you and on the many others you may never see. Bora, the immigrant tailor, once said of his work, "I make people feel good about themselves." Might we look with more intentionality upon the work we do or the presence we have.

From ordinary things we learn without trying. And from our ordinary selves, we teach without intention.

By sharing his pain, the man with the curly red hair became a fixture in my own life experience. And I don't even know his name. Then, neither does he know mine.

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# REFLECTIONS

January 19, 2023

**Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."**

*Matthew 16:24*

## Suffering

*Note: The Sunday evening deadline pressured my weekly missive, but nothing felt right. My mind would not leave my weekend. I felt empowered by it in some indescribable way, but I couldn't sort out what about it or why. Yet, my thoughts wouldn't allow me to write about anything else. So, I allowed the usual deadline to pass while I sorted through my emotions.*

Suffering was the topic for my annual weekend retreat with a group of men, most of them repeat attendees. Suffering seems like a subject to avoid, not study; a subject to conceal, not expose. Usually music, laughter, and fellowship camouflage any deep-seated emotions within us that beg for freedom. But not this time. Even the music played pensive tunes. Suffering was the topic.

The speaker knew the subject well. He deals with it daily in his psychiatry practice, but Curt's greatest gift for healing wasn't his neurological understanding of the human mind. He skillfully weaved the healing love of Jesus into the prescription.

But I became absorbed in the mood of the retreat and the emotional pain aching for relief in the hearts of so many. Everyone carried wounds into the retreat, even Curt. The makeup used to disguise that everything wasn't all right failed to cover scars that were really oozing wounds crying to be healed. A few who shared their suffering looked to Curt for answers. But the suffering wasn't limited to the one sharing his story. Without revealing specifics, tears moistened the cheeks of many in the room. Even Curt's voice quivered from time to time when lessons he shared with us touched a suffering nerve he carried too.

Suffering is part of God's curriculum for life. Does anything shape our lives more? Are the lessons from suffering ever forgotten? No. Pain from it may subside a bit over time, but the effect from suffering never completely goes away. It forms a window through which a perspective of life is viewed. From it there is fear of it happening again; but without our suffering would we have empathy or compassion for anyone else? Could love for one another be as heartfelt? Would our love of God even be?

In the room that weekend, whether in session, or while dining together, or in the informality of leisure time, a warm cloud subdued us. But we drove away from the weekend still a bit subdued I think, but with deeper love for one another, and with a warmer beat from our hearts for God.

As Paul wrote: *God works all things for good for those who love him.* That weekend, He did.

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# REFLECTIONS

January 8, 2023, Refreshed from the Archives of January 8, 2017

**Pleasant words are a honeycomb,  
sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.**

*Proverbs 16:24*

## Home on the Range

Some of us are still around with memories of the Saturday westerns with singing cowboys Gene Autry and Roy Rogers and their sidekicks Pat Buttram and Gabby Hayes. And we also remember the songs of the Sons of the Pioneers in those movies. Many times, I would go home singing the songs and playing the parts of the cowboy heroes who conquered the bad guys and won the affections of the girl.

Home, home on the range,  
Where the deer and the antelope play,  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,  
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

Having grown up in ranching country, I easily relate to the open range with horseback cowboys herding cattle for branding or shipment to market. Though I never found comfort astride a horse, the open range still offers a touch of home to my senses just as the song suggests. And perhaps even more is a powerful reminder therein, “Where seldom is heard a discouraging word.”

Cowboy life is rugged, fraught with danger, and an unrelenting battle with perils of wildlife and nature. Encouragement is treasured if not necessary for survival. But isn't that also true in our journeys through life. We're all in of need it. We all should offer it.

How easily we find fault in those around us, often branding people by their deficiencies as if we have none of our own. Even good qualities of those we love become overlooked when we give too much attention to their faults. *Reckless words pierce like a sword*, says Proverbs 12:18, *but the tongue of the wise brings healing*.

It seems to me we make a greater difference in people's lives with encouraging words than with disapproving ones. As someone so accurately described, “People will not remember you so much by what you did for them, as by how you made them feel.”

Encouraged is a pretty good feeling to leave with someone. Wonder if that should be one of this year's resolutions?

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# REFLECTIONS

**The Lord is my light and my salvation —  
whom shall I fear?**

**The Lord is the stronghold of my life —  
of whom shall I be afraid?**

*Psalms 27:1*

## Prayer for the New Year

*Gracious and loving God, we come to you today at the beginning of a New Year. We enter it with the freshness of a new birth. It is a time when much of the old has been washed away and, in some ways, wipes our slates clean. But everything is not new.*

*We carry illnesses that weaken us, broken relationships that divide us, and wars that place many in harm's way. Still, the New Year brings with it hope for a better world.*

*Our country was founded on faith in you, dear Lord. We pray for the faith on which we were founded, to be strengthened in our hearts and minds that we may once again become a living example of the might of one nation under God. Guide the leaders of our country, our states, and our cities to make sound decisions that will always be in keeping with your will. But most of all we pray that your peace and your love may be rediscovered throughout our land.*

*Our needs exceed our abilities to meet them without your power to heal, shelter to protect, and love to bring us peace. So Loving God, even with all our human frailties, scars, and uncertainties at this new beginning, we come to you as newborn children.*

*And we ask you to bring peace throughout our war-torn world. We ask not only for the end of the wars, but also for peace that only comes through your loving hands. Help us overcome our pride that looks to ourselves as our source of strength; and help us rid ourselves of desires for possessions, power, and position that have crept into our lives as gods we serve.*

*Gracious God, we seek forgiveness for the wrongs done to you and to our fellow man. We seek help to release our resentments toward those who have harmed us and we seek forgiveness from those whose lives we have wounded by word or deed. Help restore broken relationships through a reconciliation that will help us love each other as you have called us all to love.*

*We ask you for healing of the diseases that reduce the quality of life we seek and threaten the breath of life you have so graciously given. Yet, even as we ask for good health, we submit to your will fully knowing that you will not ask more of us than we can bear.*

*But most of all, Loving God, we seek to live our lives as you would have us live—to love you with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength and with all our mind; and, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Help us turn our lives toward Jesus, your son, for only by facing toward him can our lives reflect the Savior.*

*We ask these prayers, Loving God, in the precious name of Jesus in whose name we pray.*

*Amen*

*“You are the light of the world.”*

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