

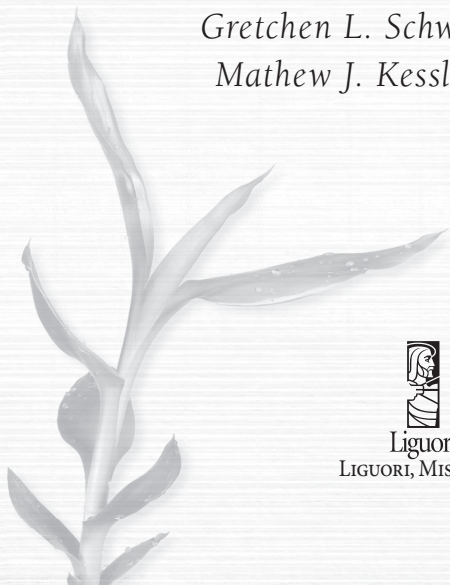
Hidden Graces

Poems for
Crisis, Struggle
and Renewal

Selected and Introduced by
Gretchen L. Schwenker, PhD
Mathew J. Kessler, C.Ss.R.



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Crisis



WHAT IS THERE ABOUT DARKNESS that can be so unsettling? When days shorten as autumn recedes into winter, we soon miss the light. We yearn for it as it becomes increasingly rare, impatient for the longer days of a new spring. Out of the shadows, it is likely the anticipation of a new beginning that beguiles us. But as we wait for that fresh start, the dimming landscape that surrounds us can wear down our sense of hope. The raw natural world we experience can become a metaphor for troubles endured, whether apparent or hidden.

The promise of salvation through God's love should help us stand strong in the bleakness, but sometimes we forget the promise that there is always a way out into the light. We allow ourselves to become consumed by the dark, our existence fading out of focus. The sadness that can happen too often in the world we inhabit takes over. We lament and feel dispirited. Still, perhaps this is a process leading to new life, slowly directing us toward the light of Christ.

Before Jesus, the people of Israel showed they knew a lot about lament. They appealed frequently and loudly to God to help them through their distress. "Let my

cry come to you,” prays the psalmist. Faith directs us, impels us toward God, and his grace carries us through experiences that cause brokenness and tears. But we need to work through so much that blocks our path to that grace. Transformation does not happen simply in one prayer or even one epiphany.

Part of the process is the expression of our longings, grief, despair, loss, regrets—whatever it may be that binds us unto ourselves, distances us from God, and keeps us from being present to others. The writers among us have always helped articulate these conflicts, and poets especially seem to get to the core of pain, naming the hurts for us.

Looking at poems that were written in times of crisis can be part of our path forward. It is easy to see our hard times in their words. “We are who are left, how shall we look again?” asks Wilfred Gibson. He knew well the toll of death as too many friends never returned from the war of his generation (World War I). Who has not experienced the thought of going on to another day without someone we love? So Gibson says “...how shall we turn to little things,/And listen

to the birds and winds and streams/Made holy by their dreams.” It is all our loss together.

Jane Kenyon knows this and copes with the aftermath of someone dying at home, a change that may well have been sudden. What matters is that her world view is crushingly altered: “Now curtains lift and fall/in windows I’ve never before seen open.” How do we remake our lives after such an event changes them completely? Some of us are convinced that we will not recover.

Deborah Digges faces the loss of a husband she deeply loves. The void overwhelms her as she takes stock of his possessions: “O the great ghost ships of his shoes.” She can hardly face what she sees, and he lingers there for her, “his smell like a kiss blown through hallways of cedar.” We who have experienced the death of someone close to us know this well—it can be a scent, a piece of music, or an old suit that touches our emotional memory: “I am passing his light seersucker suit/with one grass-stained knee.” We feel so alone, and helpless to alter the reality. It is that helplessness that can engulf us.

For Longfellow, the toll of grief causes a review

of his life. His young wife dies suddenly, and he finds himself reflecting on what he has not accomplished: "... and I have let/The years slip from me and have not fulfilled/The aspiration of my youth, to build/Some tower of song with lofty parapet." In coping with losing her, he sees his own mortality ahead. He regrets and feels pulled down by the inevitable. Grief can paralyze us but so can morbidly revisiting our past. We live in disappointment when we focus on dreams not realized, not seeing that the achievement with meaning is that of keeping on and starting once more.

Loss comes to us through so many experiences. We deal with loss through death, aging, and poor health. Perhaps we reflect on missed connections, unmet goals, or failed relationships. The loss can be very direct; overnight we find ourselves without the job that fed our family or we get turned down for an opportunity that may have made our life better. We lose hope and consume ourselves with our personal shortcomings.

Christina Rossetti had a strong faith that on occasion took her into dwelling on how she was failing God: "Have mercy, Thou my God; mercy, my God;/For I can

hardly bear life day by day:/Be I here or there I fret myself away.” She is distraught: “I pray for grace; but then my sins unpray.” She cannot bear what she perceives as God’s disillusionment with her, “A sorrow beyond sorrow in Thy look.” At least she turns to the Lord, even as this harsh evaluation of faults can be too much. We need to seek the way forward not in regret but in love—it is a demanding discipline.

Sometimes we just lose our way. Everything appears to have gone very wrong: “In walking, talking, smiling,/I live not now,” declares Thomas Hardy. The whole of his existence has come to nothing. Like Rossetti, Hardy expresses something that is often tempting for us—he voices the dangerous idea of being worthless. But unlike her, he does not see beyond this assessment of his miserable life. He is suffering from a death of the spirit: “There was no tragic transit,/No catch of breath,/When silent seasons inched me/On to this death...”

The poetry of Linda Pastan brings us right back to other spirits—those we love who have died. Their impact on us still has a living force, and we cling to

the remnants of memory left behind. This time, it is through the mechanics of a simple answering machine: “I call and hear your voice/on the answering machine/ weeks after your death,/a fledgling ghost still longing/ for human messages.” A voice is so personal; Pastan writes that it is “more palpable than photographs/or fingerprints.” She is coping through this recorded link, and just can’t get past it.

Do we seek peace in coping or just a quiet space? How do we learn to cope, grasp acceptance, and move on? The poets keep trying to help. Robert Frost speaks of a heart “...aching to seek,” but not knowing where to go. “Ah, when to the heart of man/Was it ever less than a treason/To go with the drift of things,” he questions. When can we accept what has happened?

Resolution to our anxieties can seem beyond reach, but occasionally there is humor even in grief. Moments of lightness can put our expressions of sadness into context. So W.H. Auden exhorts us to “stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone./Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,” because there’s to be a funeral. Auden smiles at his self-indulgence, admitting

that he thought “love would last forever: I was wrong.” But of course it does last when we keep focused on the promise of new life, a faith promise that is difficult to believe when we walk into a room and someone who was always there is not.

We react to loss, and the feeling can rightly be relentless. The hopelessness that can accompany sadness is likely the worst. We just cannot get up again and are literally stuck. It makes it challenging to be grateful to our creator, to appreciate the beauty of the world and the gift of our life. Friends and family will try to support us. Listen to Mary Oliver: “And friends, being as kind as friends can be,/striving to lift the darkness.” She knows that she is surrounded by wonders, “the blue skirts of the ocean,” and she begs God’s forgiveness for her inability to take her part in that creation, at least for a while.

Sara Teasdale expresses similar regret, but she is too overcome by the loss of love to free herself of such inspired depression. She sits in the beauty of a spring night and cannot appreciate any of its sensory experience: “My throat should ache with praise, and I/Should

kneel in joy beneath the sky.” Teasdale innately realizes that she is wrong not to embrace her rich, lyrical world, with “drowsy lights” that are “dim and pearled.” But she remains like so many of us in disappointment, asking just, “Why am I crying after love?”

In James Joyce’s “Chamber Music” we come to the lowest point. We feel alone and fear that we are alone, as Joyce describes, in a place where an army will come “clanging upon the heart as upon an anvil.” He asks why the person he loves has left him to this private nightmare. It is desolation. We are pulled into a state where we are left, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes, “Hearing oblivion beyond memory.” That line speaks to our inconsolable selves. Browning knows the depth of sadness that comes with being so close to love, and realizing it is not enough: “But I look on thee—on thee—/Beholding, besides love, the end of love.”

These are our moments of crisis, when we feel out of reach of God’s care, but there is always a way back, and on the way, there are struggles to come.

Crisis

“Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you.
Do not hide your face from me
on the day of my distress.
Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily on the day
when I call.”

PSALM 102:1–2

Lament

We who are left, how shall we look again
Happily on the sun or feel the rain,
Without remembering how they who went
Ungrudgingly, and spent
Their all for us, loved too the sun and rain?

A bird among the rain-wet lilac sings—
But we, how shall we turn to little things,
And listen to the birds and winds and streams
Made holy by their dreams,
Nor feel the heart-break in the heart of things?

WILFRED GIBSON