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Greetings and salutations, brothers. There seems to be no way to write one of these notes without getting nostalgic or puffing oneself up. I guess that’s a risk worth taking. I want the friends I’ve lost touch with but still miss, especially in Berkeley and Elihu, to know that all is as well with me and mine as I could hope for. God has continued to be kind to me, for reasons best known to himself.

I lost my father in August 1968 and my mother in August 1971. I met my soul mate, Bonnie Lowry Alexander, in the fall of 1971, and we have been companions of the road ever since. We’ve raised Shannon, Bonnie’s daughter from her former marriage, to the threshold of adulthood. Shannon is presently trying to find a place for herself in postmodern America with a liberal arts degree, a sweet blues voice, a touch with clay and words, and a strong sense of decency and compassion. Remember what that was like, getting started? Needless to say, it’s no easier now than it was then.

1 dropped master’s programs in theology (Union 1970) and education (City College 1971), eventually got it together to work through a graduate program in English at University of Massachusetts (Ph.D. 1982). My dissertation on John Milton’s heterodox theology was one of the ways by which God led me back to the Church—the Episcopalians, the enemy camp for Milton. Bonnie meanwhile completed her B.A. at University of Massachusetts, then an M.F.A. in writing at Goddard College’s nonresidential program. We got around to marriage in May 1979, and our son Geoff was an anniversary gift, born almost a year to the minute after our nuptials. Geoff is a full-blown adolescent now, with a million interests and opinions. He’s good to be around. He keeps us honest and on our toes. He has a strong sense of justice and a skeptical fascination with how the political world works, as well as a love for the Ramones, Monty Python, and John Ford movies. Bonnie’s faith survived an M.Div. degree at General Theological Seminary, and she has been a (frequently lonely) voice of conscience in the Episcopal Church for some time now. Our understanding of the gospel has led us to a consistent pro-life ethic, which leaves us at odds with our liberal friends on the issue of abortion and with our evangelical friends on the subjects of flag-waving and militarism. We have found some support and kinship with the good people of outfits like the Seamless Garment Network and Feminists for Life.

A Fulbright lectureship has brought us to Uganda, where Bonnie and I

are both teaching at Makerere University. Uganda is a bruised and broken paradise of good people who deserve a better history than their post-colonial leaders have offered them. Our Makerere students are the children of the Amin and Obote years of terror, and it is astonishing how they have managed to cultivate a spirit of resilience, hope, discipline, courtesy, and commitment. Children mean a lot to people here (an American aid worker describes them with a certain mixture of bewilderment and contempt as “pro-natalist”), and many people now have the cautious sense that at last a humane government, committed to democratization and development, has given their children a future to hope for. We love it here; a grant renewal will allow for us to work here through the summer of 1994. If you can find a way to do it, give yourself a sabbatical, pack your bags and kids and head somewhere like Kampala, where your gifts and skills will not bring you much in the way of wealth, power, fame, or even comfort, but they will matter to the people who need them, and you won’t regret too much leaving the rest behind.

When we return to the U.S., I’ll go back to teaching literature of all sorts and combinations, from Homer and the Yahwist to Derek Walcott and Gloria Naylor, at Sarah Lawrence, where I’ve been since 1982. Bonnie and I don’t seem to settle easily into any of the cubbyholes of identification that American culture provides these days. Academically, this seems to mean a lot of cross-pollination. I try to open up the literary “canon” where it needs fresh air and to remind people that literature is no one’s private intellectual property, so they shouldn’t ghettoize the imagination or shut themselves off from anything great that has been written by anyone. It also means that I try to converse with contemporary theory without becoming the kind of pedant whose gibberish Jonathan Swift would laugh at. Sarah Lawrence is at times a cultural funhouse, always a demanding, improvisatory place to teach, academically a few worlds away from the place we fantasized about at those mixers in the late sixties. But that’s another story.

Of all the things I half-remember fondly or remember half-fondly about Yale, the remark that sticks with me as perhaps most treasured: Robert Beach, on a road trip deep into the Adirondacks, rasping, “the further they get from the city, the more they love Jesus.” Jobs, how right you were. Amen. One of the images that sticks with me is of Jim Amoss staggering out of the Jimi Hendrix concert at Woolsey Hall with eyes ablaze and smoke pouring out of his ears. And what about the Living Theatre? I am not allowed to burn money. I am not allowed to smoke marijuana. Heavy. Breathe, breathe, fly.

1 hope you are all still flying. 1 won’t be with you at reunion time. If there’s room in the book, let this tail end of a poem stand in for me. I wrote it this year to say farewell to the graduating students I’d advised and worked with at Sarah Lawrence; but being about bright college years, it’s something I also want to say to my long-lost friends after many years. Meanwhile brothers, keep the faith. Love your enemies. Keep on keeping on.

From “The Beginning of Wisdom”:

So, figure, when the time is ripe,

we’re bound to meet again, perhaps outside

a shabby tin-roofed market stall in the third world

(the one where the imagined and the real are one).

Call it the Common Man’s Friendship Shop,

stacked to the rafters with all

the untold goods of earth,

and even if the veil of dust

kicked up by homeward sojourners

makes recognition hard,

your voice will be as unmistakable

as it has always been,

for those who break words once together don’t forget.

We’ll joke about how knowledge and affection come

as unpredictably as startled bees lost up the pants,

and laugh the sweet intimate laughter of friends

who have had the great pleasure of reading books together

and sharing such nonsense as sometimes comes to mind

at times like this when anything is possible,

knowing it all will be well,

as well as anyone who loves

this brokenhearted world

could keep on praying for.