A photograph of a pond with several large, round, green lily pads floating on the surface. The water is a deep blue color. In the foreground, there are two white water lilies in full bloom, with yellow centers. To their left and slightly behind, there is a white water lily bud. In the upper center, there is another white water lily bud. The lily pads are scattered across the pond, some overlapping. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

Pieces of Mind

The Collection

1370 little gems
from the writings of
Ken O'Sullivan

Dear reader,

Welcome to the PDF version of *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection*; it is given freely, but I do ask that you consider making a donation to **Galway Simon Community**, a very worthy charity which takes care of the homeless – those who have little or nothing in our community. Please be generous.

You can donate online at: www.galwaysimon.ie. Galway Simon has added a ‘Pieces of Mind Book’ option to the question ‘What prompted you to donate?’ on their donation page. Please check this when donating.

The Book

Please read the section ‘To Begin’; it introduces you to some important features and characters. Thereafter you can dip in anywhere. *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection* is, ideally, a coffee table or bedside locker book – that is, a traditional book that you can pick up, delve in at any point, read one or two paragraphs, and put down again till the next time. The PDF format is not ideal, but it enables me to make free copies available to a much wider readership. Here is a suggestion: when you have your computer or other device on for some other purpose, take an extra minute, scroll down randomly through the book, and see what you come across. There is some really good stuff in the book, even if I say so myself. And if it is not your cup of tea right now, don’t ditch it; file it away until your situation or outlook changes.

I would be happy to hear from you if you find any item that means something to you. My e-mail address is below. Please feel free to forward the book to anybody you think might enjoy it.

Best wishes and many blessings,

Ken

kenosulli@gmail.com



Pieces Of Mind

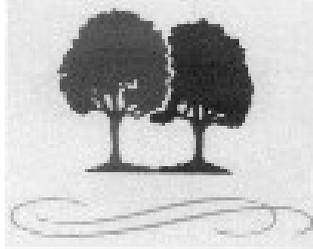
The Collection

A companion
in sunlight or in shadow

1370 little gems
from the writings of
Ken O'Sullivan

Pieces Of Mind: The Collection

is a limited private edition



Produced by the author on a MacBook Pro
computer using Pages 5.6.2.

Editing and layout by Sally Vince

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Cover photograph: Lilies on the mountain lake
at Máméan, Connemara, Ireland
taken by the author.

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Dedication

For all those I love
especially my wife

Carmel

my four adult children

Paul Barry Julie Alan

my three daughters-in-law

Isabelle Slavka Una

and my seven grandchildren

Lara Matthew Finn Seán

Ryan Léa Ella

With affectionate and grateful memories
of dear family members and good friends who
have left this life since the production of the
First Edition in 2001

And in loving memory of
my mother and father

Margaret (Shannon) O'Sullivan

(1911–1956)

and

Matthew O'Sullivan

(1907–1985)

Acknowledgements

No undertaking of this magnitude can come to fruition without the concerted support and co-operation of a number of people.

First, my heartfelt thanks to my dear wife, Carmel, for her ongoing encouragement to persist with my writing projects for nearly thirty years. Many times, she has proofread items for me, including the entire texts of the previous editions of *Pieces Of Mind*, and offered valuable suggestions on various pieces, from short reflections to stories and essays and my full-length novel, *Black On Magenta*. Moreover, she has a wonderful gift: she makes me laugh! Any writer who has a partner in their life to support them as my wife always has me is fortunate beyond measure.

I am deeply indebted to my long-time friend, Liam Ó Broin of Mall Publications, first and foremost for his loyal friendship, but also for his publishing and design expertise. He has been a tower of strength since he first offered to help me with the production of the second edition of *Pieces Of Mind* in 2010. Without his diligent assistance, patience and good humour, I would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to place this book in your hands.

The polished and stylish layout of the book, the enormous task of checking and formatting nearly fourteen hundred items, the painstaking proofreading and everything else that was needed to bring the text to print-ready condition

Pieces Of Mind: The Collection

are due entirely to the professionalism of my editor, Sally Vince. At our very first meeting, I knew I would be comfortable working with her, and she has been a fount of invaluable advice. As anybody who has ever undertaken a project like this knows, it is very difficult to get a book right. Sally did it.

Beginning with my own wonderful parents, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has contributed to the person I am today. It is due to their love, nurturing, friendship, good humour, counsel, direction, support, wisdom, and even to the negativity, disrespect and antipathy of some – for they, too, have been my teachers – that, over many years, I have been enabled to produce the material you will find in this book.

Finally, in order to thank the God Of My Life adequately for all the blessings and miracles in my life, as well as for bringing me safely through times of great turbulence, I would need to write another book of a similar length to this one – and even then, I would only be scratching the surface.

To Begin

Welcome – and some background information

Welcome to *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection*. No, that's not a misprint on the front cover. There really are 1370 items in this book, and nobody is more surprised than I am. It never ceases to amaze me how the material has accumulated since I started to write seriously in 1989. It all began with a poem I wrote, out of the blue, while having dinner in a small village hotel in Austria in June of that year, but the story is too long for the telling here.

The first edition in 2001 contained 300 items, and the second, in 2010, 625. When I started to trawl through my writings for additional material for this edition, I was aiming for a total of 1000, believing that I was probably setting my sights too high. But as I read through the work, seemingly suitable nuggets kept popping up and begging me to include them. And, having created the little darlings, how could I refuse them? When the total reached over 2200, I said to myself, 'Ken, I think it's time to stop!' Subsequent reflection and economic considerations prompted me to cut the number significantly.

But what's with the quirky 1370; why not a nice round number? Apart from the fact that I am fundamentally a maverick and don't want to conform, a much more important reason is that 13th July 2000 (hence, at the very real risk of

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insulting your intelligence, 13/7/0) was the most stupendous day of my life, and including this number of items in the book symbolically commemorates and honours that occasion. I would very much like to share it with you, but it is deeply personal. However, there is a fictional account of the first part of it in the item 'Miracles? Yes, definitely' (piece 137 on page 65), which will at least give you an impression of the type of occasion it was.

For this edition, I have culled the number of items which appeared in the second edition from 625 to 370, thereby retaining my favourites, and have then added 1000 new ones. When this work had been done, it struck me that a new edition is generally considered to be substantively the previous edition together with some worthwhile additions and amendments. A volume in which 40 per cent of the original material has been removed, then 1000 new items added is scarcely a new edition in the conventional sense. Therefore, I decided to call it *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection*. I like this title because it more accurately describes what the book really is: an eclectic collection of items from twenty-eight years of writing.

The material I have chosen is drawn from many privately produced volumes, which are listed in the Bibliography starting on page 670. The source volume of each item in the main part of the book is given in brackets; the occasional absence of the word 'From' indicates that the piece is given in its entirety.

Pieces Of Mind originated in 2001 as an idea to gather together 365 short items from my writing, together with a brief commentary on each, as a daily reflection book. But I concluded that there were so many of these around already, there was no point in reinventing the wheel. Thus, in the first and second editions, I decided on the simpler strategy of assembling the pieces in random order and let my reader dip in at will. I have followed the same strategy in this edition. There is no attempt to categorise the pieces in any way; on the contrary, I have aimed at as varied a miscellany as possible, so one never really has any idea what's coming next. The only

concession I have made to editing is to provide a heading for each piece which encapsulates the theme. You will find some partial repetition – that is, the same theme expressed in a somewhat different way – so that if you miss it in one place, you will come across it in another.

The book is not just a diverse collection of bits and pieces. It is, in a very real sense, the story of a life. Not, of course, in a continuous narrative as in an autobiography, but in randomly presented bite-size chunks that are easy to assimilate. If, over time, you get to read all the pieces, you will know as much about me as if I had written a conventional autobiography, maybe even more. And since this aims to be a true reflection of me, you will find everything from the sacred to the silly and from the philosophical to the (slightly!) profane.

Don't overlook the full-length story 'In A Nutshell', which you will find in the middle of the book, starting on page 361. It is a light-hearted romp through psychotherapy, counselling and similar aberrations! I'd like to suggest that you read it on a day when you're feeling distinctly out of sorts: it might give you a lift and a smile or two.

Spirituality anybody?

I have been blessed with the most beautiful spirituality, and have attempted to give you a sense of it here, for which reason you will find many pieces that deal with this topic. I ask you most earnestly to keep an open mind as you read them.

I use the word 'God' as it is a practical one-syllable notation, but feel free to use any other term with which you are comfortable, for example: higher power, great spirit, supreme being, the Universe, life force, and so on. Also, please note that I refer to God in the male form (he, him, his) purely for linguistic convenience, rather than constantly repeating the stylistically clumsy he/she, his/her, him/her combinations. The God I know is both one hundred per cent male and one hundred per cent female, but, in reality, he almost certainly includes but also transcends gender or any of our finite perceptions of him.

If, on the other hand, you don't believe anything at all, permit me to direct your attention to the Appendix, where you will find an essay entitled 'Memo From A Former Atheist' starting on page 651. This is a response to the book *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins (published in 2006). The essay carries a strong message in its own right so you do not need to have read that book. A much more detailed Mk II version of this essay is also available; please email me if you would like me to send you a pdf copy.

In all of the offerings throughout the book there is no attempt to present a cohesive thesis on spirituality – or on anything else, for that matter. Religions, of their nature, are necessarily prescriptive but, where spirituality is concerned, while there will be some common denominators, each person's experience will be unique. This book gives you an insight into mine. Even now, however, some of my readers will be wincing at the use of the word 'spirituality'. This is not a judgement, merely a statement based on very long experience. For this reason, I ask you, please, to read 'The Word "Spiritual"' at the end of this introductory section. Incidentally, you will come across the phrase 'My Beautiful One' here and there in the text. This is a term of endearment for the God of my understanding which comes from my all-time favourite piece of writing, 'The Dance Of Forever' (piece 1367 on page 645).

Daily reflections and four-letter words

On a lighter note, the thought has just struck me that, if you were to use *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection* as a book of daily reflections and read only one a day, there is sufficient here to keep you going for three years and nine months!

Incidentally, several people have commented that I reveal a lot about myself in these writings, and I always respond that, when all is said and done, I have, particularly in latter years, become very much like an open book in most things. There are, of course, aspects of my life which are personal, but there is nothing about me that somebody doesn't know. This is a very great freedom.

You will find a very small number of pieces which include the ubiquitous four-letter word and others. Why? Because I'm human and, as good as anybody, I can employ that taboo term when I'm angry or frustrated, although I use it and others sparingly. I want the book to be as accurate a reflection as possible of who I am; so, to sanitise the text and leave it out would give you a false impression of my virtue. I'm no saint, you understand. (Come to think of it, the saints were no saints either, not while they were here at least. I've never heard of anybody being canonised in their own lifetime, have you? Oops! There goes my offbeat sense of humour already. Perhaps I shouldn't have unleashed it on you this early; you'll get enough of that in the book as you go along.) All that said, I have no wish to offend anybody with occasional coarse language, and I apologise in advance – but only to those readers who have *never* employed the f-word or similar obscenities to vent their feelings. Actually, having checked, I find that there are only about a dozen expletives in the two hundred and eleven thousand words of *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection*. Pretty restrained really!

Poetry, prose and pocket-sized sustenance

If I may wax somewhat whimsical for a moment: when people say of the second edition 'I enjoyed your book of poems', I am tempted to believe they haven't read it. To be fair, a quick glance will give the impression that the content is comprised largely of poems. Because of the white space to the right of the page, poems are more eye-catching. In fact, in terms of word count, the second edition comprised approximately 30 per cent poetry; in this edition, poems account for less than 10 per cent of the content; the rest is prose.

The reason I mention this is that, generally speaking, poetry, while loved by some and often quoted to good effect on noteworthy occasions, is hardly considered the most popular form of literary communication, so I give these figures to cheer you up if you don't like it. Some poetry can seem remote and inaccessible, but I am pretty up front with my stuff; they all tell a story, and since most of the items

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included here are short extracts from longer poems, I have endeavoured to select lines that say something worthwhile in relatively few words. So, if versification is not your thing, take heart.

Over the years, I have been privileged to carry on a large personal correspondence. I was searching for something among the letters one day, just as I was starting the compilation process for this edition, and, having found it, the thought struck me that it would be a suitable item for the new book. So I trawled through many old letters, and you will find about one hundred short extracts from these epistles. In a very small number of them, I have changed minor details to protect the identity of the recipients.

I have purposely produced *Pieces Of Mind* in A5 format, so that you will never have to travel away from home without your compact 'Ken O'Sullivan' to accompany you and provide mental sustenance on those long train journeys and interminable waits at airports. Equally, it's a handy size to keep on your bedside locker in readiness for those lonely hours when you fall prey to insomnia.

On second thoughts, even in this format, the book is actually not compact and is too big to bring with you when travelling. If you would like to have it with you, however, I would be happy to send you a pdf version which you can open on your tablet or other device (or which you may like to forward to friends). Just drop me a note; my email address is below and also on the back of the title page. There is no charge for this version, but if it is of any value to you or anybody to whom you might forward it, perhaps you or they would consider making a donation to a charity, preferably one which cares for those who have little or nothing, or one which looks after the very ill. Thank you.

***Perspectives* – a major component of the book**

Many pieces in this book come from my book *Perspectives*, fourth edition, which is a collection of nearly six hundred reflections on (mostly) spiritual topics, together with approximately 60,000 words of additional material. You will

find about four hundred and fifty extracts and complete items from the main volume. I have completed a pdf book entitled *A Pathway Through Perspectives*, which includes all the items here, and which will have new pieces added to it from time to time. I have not yet decided whether to distribute this widely, simply because a traditional book can be with only one person at a time, whereas electronic files can be duplicated exponentially, and I am not sure that I want to be that prolific! However, if the items from *Perspectives* appeal to you and you would like to have access to them separately from the rest of the text, email me a short note, and I will send you a copy if I decide to release it into the cyberworld. It won't take a very astute observer to spot an absence of logic in all this: in the previous paragraph, I am freely offering the whole book which includes all the items from *Perspectives*, but am balking at distributing the *Perspectives* items on their own. Why? I haven't a clue, and I am not going to make any attempt to figure it out. And if you'd like to know why I have no wish to do that, read 'So much for philosophy', piece 111 on page 55!

Further reading

You will note that the source of each entry in this book is given and some have a footnote referring to other individual items and books from my writings. Some are personal and I don't usually release them beyond my immediate circle of family and friends, but if the item mentioned appeals to you, and you would like to have a pdf version, drop me an email, and I will send you a copy if it is one of the pieces available for general distribution.

If you are not familiar with Fred (my conscience or inner voice), Lucille (my charming and beautiful Muse) and Jasmine (the delightful little fairy who is a more recent arrival), you may like to read the introduction to these characters on page xv so that the passages relating to them will make more sense.

All other people – real and fictional – named and quoted throughout the book, along with places mentioned, are brought together in a section called People And Places (pages 661–669).

The first edition of *Pieces Of Mind* in 2001 ran to seventy-five copies and was produced for family and friends. There were 1400 printed copies of the second edition, and, at date of writing, there are at least 4000 pdf copies in the cyberworld. This new edition will also be produced in larger quantities, although the final number will not be decided until the last minute. Naturally, I have no idea where the majority of them will end up. So, for readers who come across this volume and wonder who the hell Ken O’Sullivan is, there is a sort of offbeat, tongue-in-cheek, biographical note in the Appendix which, while almost totally devoid of the kind of detail you’d expect in a curriculum vitae, tells you quite a bit about me.

In that vignette, incidentally, I say that I greatly admire scholars with a genuine love of English. Prince among these was my English teacher throughout secondary school, Robin Atthill, a gentle and loving man, to whom I have dedicated *Grin And Bear It!*, one of my privately produced volumes. I am eternally in his debt for passing his love of language on to me. To be fair to my readers, a more formal biographical note follows the light-hearted one.

Why this book?

I must include a word on the motivation for producing this book and its two predecessors. A few months after the launch of the second edition in 2010, I met somebody who had acquired a copy. He referred to a particular item, and said, ‘Are you seriously trying to tell us that ...?’ Normally, I am courteous and wait till the speaker has finished what they want to say before I respond. On this occasion, I granted myself an exemption. Before he could go any further, I replied, ‘With respect, I am not trying to *tell* you anything. I have no mission to preach, teach or convince, only to relate my own story and say what is valid for me. So I ask you, please, to approach the book rather as you might approach a spontaneous visit to a supermarket (i.e. without a specific shopping list). Take what you like from the shelves, and leave the other items, without shunning them. On a later visit, you might feel differently and pick other “products” from the various displays. Then there

may be things which you will never “purchase”. Just pass them by.’

Contacting me

If you would like to get in touch, I’d be glad to hear from you. In this context, it is only fair to make clear that I will not argue or debate any of the material with you; this book is an account of my personal journey: it is a sharing, not an indoctrination. Therefore, as the previous paragraph suggests, please adopt any item which resonates with you and leave the rest aside. If, on the other hand, the book turns out not to be your cup of tea, I ask you please to pass it on to somebody who you think might enjoy it. If you do decide to keep it, perhaps you would be so kind as to pass it on to a new owner when you have no further use for it, rather than leave it to gather dust on your bookshelves.

And to end ...

Writing has entertained me, nurtured me and kept me at least half sane for many years, way beyond what I could have hoped for when I first put pen to paper. Indeed, 2014 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of my serious writing career, and I had hoped to have the book ready then, but there was way too much work to be done to complete the opus in time. So *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection*, somewhat late, is a celebration and I am happy to share it with you.

My wife and I covered the production costs of the first and second editions. Many were given away freely, others in return for a donation to selected charities; we kept nothing for ourselves. With this edition, the proceeds on each book will once again be given to charity. The reason we do not wish to make anything for ourselves is that we really like the scripture which says, *Freely you have received, freely give.*

Incidentally, thank you for taking the time to read these introductory pages. That may sound like an odd thing to say, but, while I haven’t done a scientific survey, I have gleaned the distinct impression over many years that people don’t read the

introduction to most books – rather like the habit, widespread among humans, of buying a new gadget, then not bothering with the booklet which explains how it works.

A while after the launch of the second edition, a friend told me that she loved the book and had read it ‘cover to cover’, but that she had a question, namely, who are Fred and Lucille? ‘Did you read the Introduction?’ I queried. She looked at me askance as if I had asked a stupid question, and responded with a ‘No!’ in a tone of voice which clearly added the non-verbal ‘What do you think I am?’ So, as I say, thank you for reading it. Your reward for so doing is that you are now primed for a more enlightened read!

This is one of the biggest projects I have ever undertaken, certainly by far the biggest writing project, and it has been a labour of love. In a very real sense, the book is my gift to the world – at least, the very tiny portion of the world to which it will find its way. I hope that doesn’t sound pompous, for it is intended to be anything but that; born rather of a deep desire to have what has nurtured me go on to nurture and/or entertain as many people as it can reach.

I am happy, and deeply grateful, that comments on the first two editions of *Pieces Of Mind* indicate that numerous people derived enjoyment, support and encouragement from them. Indeed, readers have told me that the material made them laugh, cry, reflect, think, remember, reappraise and more. This book is my way of giving something back in gratitude for what has so far been a very full and, to say the least, absorbing, fulfilling, mystifying, difficult, surprising and – in some ways – incredible life. Thus, it is my heartfelt wish that it will engage, entertain, comfort or touch you in some way, however small. It is in this spirit that I invite you to delve into the near-seven hundred pages which await your perusal.

Many blessings,

Ken O'Sullivan

13th July 2017

kenosulli@gmail.com

Introducing Fred, Lucille And Jasmine

Fred

There is a permanent resident inside my head, a disembodied voice (except insofar as it shares my body – and without my permission, I might add). It is probably the kind of voice experienced by all humans, and variously perceived as the conscience, the inner voice, the permanent indwelling commentator, or whatever one might call it, but which (or ‘who’, if you prefer) I call, with a sort of reluctant affection I suppose, ‘Fred’. I chose the name on foot of an anecdote I heard some years ago. It was humorous but somewhat tasteless, for which reason I will not repeat it here. Sorry for raising your expectations then leaving you flat!

As one might expect, Fred is highly unpredictable: all positive and supportive one minute and a thorough pain in the rear end the next, for which reason I have a volatile relationship with him.

The ‘Fred’ stories are (mostly) over-the-top caricatures of the kind of conversations that go on in my head – God help me!

Lucille

Lucille is my Muse, the stunningly beautiful (though nearly three thousand years old) goddess who inspires my literary masterpieces. I'd be lost without her. Mind you, it would be unjust of me not to admit that I also produce some utter junk, which is not her doing.

It was only in writing a poem entitled 'Amusing', which was penned on the spot on a radio programme many years ago, that I discovered her name. Since then, our relationship has become a good deal more intimate – platonically speaking, naturally. Over time, I have come to rely on her for a good deal more than just literary inspiration: companionship, advice, moral support and so forth.

Actually, as time has gone by, she has come to rely on me in times of need too. Indeed, the perceptive reader may, at times, be liable to speculate that there is more to it than the good Plato had in mind but, of course, such suspicions would be purely in the realms of fantasy, since Lucille is merely a figment of my imagination. At least, I think she is ...

Jasmine

Jasmine is the latest character to emerge from the inner storehouse of my imagination. She is a delightful, somewhat forgetful, little fairy who cannot recall where she came from, whose spells don't always work, and whom I met on a tree in a favourite woodland at Halloween 2012. To be clear: Jasmine was on the tree and I was on *terra firma*.

She is a real gem, can be disarmingly human at times, and has an engaging sense of humour. Her real significance is that the first story I wrote about my acquaintance with her – 'Whose Tree?' – came out of the blue one day, dispelling the heartbreak of a four-year dry period during which I was unable to write anything. Curiously, I was sitting in the local tax office waiting to discuss my annual return, when I spontaneously took my notebook from my briefcase, and the words poured onto the paper.

Pieces Of Mind: The Collection

Having written story number one, I thought of writing a series of children's stories with Jasmine as the central character, but, as I was attempting the second, I changed course and decided to fashion them as fairy stories for grown-up children like me.

I chose the name Jasmine simply because I liked it and it seemed an appropriate name for a fairy. Some time later, I discovered that it means 'Gift from God'. Now, how about that!



Pieces of Mind: The Collection contains many extracts from the 'Fred', 'Lucille' and 'Jasmine' stories.

The Word ‘Spiritual’

Since there are many items in this book which deal with spirituality in one way or another, it is important to take a few moments to say something about the word ‘spiritual’. In theory, it should be seen as a fairly neutral term to describe things of the spirit, as opposed to the material world. In practice, in my long experience, it is frequently seen negatively.

Let me give you one example: the jewel in the crown of my working life as a college lecturer was the formation of a personal development module entitled ‘Getting The Balance Right’. It was worthwhile beyond my imagining, and I have hundreds of anonymous evaluations that say how much participants gained from the module. It was divided into nine sections, one of which was entitled ‘The Spiritual Self’. At one point, I produced a short summary of the programme solely to give to anybody who might be interested in the work. More than one reacted by saying, ‘It looks evangelistic!’, and it was not meant as a compliment. I was nonplussed, as the work was anything but evangelistic. I scanned through the document to see if I could identify the source of the comments. Then it struck me: the word ‘spiritual’. I revised it, changing the title of that section to ‘The Quest For Meaning To Our Lives’. I have never had a negative comment since.

It seems that many associate ‘spiritual’ with intransigent religion, over-zealous proselytising, pushy evangelisation, fundamentalism or even fanaticism. This is such an immense

Pieces Of Mind: The Collection

pity. All ‘spiritual’ denotes is a stunningly, awesomely beautiful, eternal realm that is available to us all. Sadly, in the world in which we live, too few seem to seek it. This is an even greater pity, indeed virtually a tragedy.

That said, if you are willing to keep an open mind (which is not an easy thing to do – the postscript to the essay ‘Memo From A Former Atheist’ in the Appendix deals briefly with this theme) on what you will find in this book, you may just make an unexpected and most welcome discovery. I say this with respect: what have you got to lose?

Finally, please read the item ‘Religion and spirituality’, piece 6 on page 6.

(Adapted from ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’,
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*.)

Past and future

To have no time for the past is to have no time for the precious jewels that are always embedded in it, is to place no value on the treasures that are always uniquely ours unless we choose to deny or ignore them. Likewise, to disregard the future totally is to walk blindly into quicksand.

PART ONE

Pieces of Mind

The Dream

*Air, food and water will keep my
body functioning, but I need a
Dream to nurture my spirit.*

1 **A blessing to begin**

May we be whole in body, mind and spirit; may we know the joy of infinite, unconditional love in our hearts; may we find the wonder of stillness deep within; may we have peace in this moment and in each day to come, and may we always know, whether in sunlight or in shadow, that all will be well with us, here and hereafter.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

2 **Head Stuff? And what's in a title?**

I am revisiting this little piece just as I am completing the manuscript of *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection* in early 2017, as I believe it will, at the start of this new edition, make a worthwhile statement about the main 'sources' of the material.

*A bird does not sing because it has an answer;
it sings because it has a song.*

(Chinese proverb)

Likewise, I do not write because I have a solution; I write because I have a thought – or rather what I call 'an intuitive nudge' – in a much deeper place than my mind. And most of the items in this book are precisely that.

Over time, a large number of people have commented – for instance, on the first two editions of *Pieces Of Mind* – that much of what I say and write is 'head stuff'. This always takes me by surprise. From such comments, and because I am reasonably articulate, I conclude that they consider that the expressions of articulateness are manufactured in the mind. The vast majority of my thoughts and nudges, however, reside in my heart and spirit. If you don't believe in that kind of stuff, just humour me for the moment.

I don't write what I think; I write what I feel. By 'feel' I do not mean the products of fleeting emotions, which come and go or are just under the surface, rather those which reside in the deepest and most enduring part of me.

For this reason, I was toying with the idea of changing the title of this latest edition to 'Pieces Of Mind, Heart And Spirit

– The Collection’, because it would more accurately reflect the content. But that would be something of a mouthful. Moreover, *Pieces Of Mind* is now a well-established title among my readership. I have always liked the play on words, and the short title is crisper.

The way I see it, my intellect merely window-dresses the products of the heart which, I need hardly add, is where my spirit stores its treasures in my temporal life. So there you have it, dear reader. If you refer to the contents of *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection* as ‘intellectual’ or any other similar term, I promise I will brain you with a hardcover copy of the book!

To put it in a nutshell: head stuff my arse!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

3 **Opening my reading at a school – or pity the reader!**

Oh God, they’ve brought a poet in!
Pray tell what monumental sin
Of ours provoked such vengeful ire.
’Twere better to submit to fire
And brimstone than to suffer this
Inept display of hit and miss,
Of flowery words, symbolic wrap;
In short, a load of verbal crap.
Yet could it be – though scarcely meet –
That this is meant to be a treat?
Oh well, if he’s all set to share it,
I s’pose we’d better grin and bear it.

(‘Resignation’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

4 **Re: *Perspectives* (extracts appear throughout)**

The passages in this book [i.e. *Perspectives*], nearly six hundred of them, are just what the title says: perspectives, namely my personal perspectives on (mostly) spirituality.

I have no doubt that countless people before me have come to similar conclusions, but each of these thoughts was a discovery for *me* at the time it occurred; and while they have

almost certainly been expressed by others before, I haven't expressed them before, and nobody will have expressed them in quite the same way before.

There is no attempt here to offer a cohesive thesis on spirituality (God forbid!). Religions, of their nature, are prescriptive, but where spirituality is concerned, while there will be some significant common denominators, each person's experience will be unique ...

All that I have included in these pages is an account of a journey, my journey. Getting it down on paper:

- a) clarifies my thoughts
- b) gives me a written record to neutralise the caprices of mere memory, and
- c) gives me a treasury of personal reflections which I can consult and add to or modify whenever I wish ...

I have no message for the world. I have long since gained the conviction that the only truth I can hope to acquire is the truth for me. While there will naturally be certain parallels, at times delightful synchronicity, with others, it would be arrogance for me to assume that my truth is valid for anyone else. [But if anything here is found to be helpful or enjoyable, that would be a most welcome bonus.]

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

5 **In case you didn't read 'To Begin' ...**

One request: please do not throw the baby out with the bath water. If you find something helpful on one page, then something unacceptable, even outrageous in your view, on the next, please don't ditch the whole lot. Just hold on to what you find useful and leave the rest aside. Or perhaps put it aside until your situation or outlook changes – as they will.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

6 **Religion and spirituality**

Many people seem either to be confused by these two terms or else have their own understanding of them. This is mine:

Religion is an imposed or acquired set of doctrines, theologies and beliefs in which adherents are required to have faith in order to achieve some desired outcome (to be 'saved', for example). The set is packaged in rituals and laws which are the outward expressions of the components of the religion. These rituals and laws are essential tools for ensuring that the faithful conform, or the means of providing a social structure which, in theory, is desirable (a community of believers). However, the observance of rituals and laws and the creation and maintenance of a social structure can become ends in themselves, and can be empty of real meaning where the requisite faith is weak or absent. Further, religion in the hands of the wrong people can be perverted to justify all manner of malign behaviour, and one does not have to look too far to find appalling examples ...

Spirituality, on the other hand, is a derivative of the word 'spirit'. Therefore it is what takes place in the spirit, in my case a knowledge beyond knowledge, which in human terms doesn't make much sense. What I mean by it is a knowledge that is beyond the intellect and the senses, mostly beyond the limitations of language, that is to say, outside the so-called reality of ordinary everyday humanity; it is a 'knowing' born of a *profound personal experience* of the infinite, steadfast, unconditional love of God deep within. This is a knowledge which far transcends the impoverished state of mere belief (which is always subject to doubt), and cannot be destroyed by the storms of life – temporarily obscured by the fog of human experience yes, but never destroyed, for it resides in that part of me which I term the 'indestructible essence' at the core of my being. Ritual is unnecessary but, if employed, reflects the inner experience and has profound meaning. Likewise, laws have no place in an incredibly beautiful, loving, spiritual relationship. (See 'Spiritual laws', piece 139, on page 66.)

I stress that what I have said is in no way intended to be a blanket condemnation of all religion. Over the centuries,

countless souls have found their deepest spirituality through the practice of religion. Indeed, I came to my own by this route and respect it greatly as my heritage, although I have now had to leave formal religion aside as, in the end, I found it too limited and too limiting. So religion has real value when it provides a pathway to individual spirituality. But religion without spirituality is barren.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

7 **Happiness is ...**

I only have to look at my own professional and private life to recognise that the best work I have produced, that has helped me and many other people, was born out of my own pain. And as this realisation grows within me, the miracles multiply. I never thought I would think this way. I naively thought that if I was happy there would be no pain and vice versa. Now I can see how the two coexist. In using the word 'happy' I am speaking of a happiness that the world does not seem to understand that well.

(From a letter, June 2003)

8 **Progress**

Speaking of 'No', I have a good friend who has a serious problem saying no. It was so bad that he had to cancel a weekend away with his wife because he couldn't say no to people who asked him to do things over the same weekend. So I bought him a serious self-help book entitled, *Don't Say Yes When You Want To Say No*.^{*} The next time I saw him, I hid the book behind my back and said, 'I am going to ask you to do something and you won't be able to say no, will you?' He agreed that he would not be able to say no. So I produced the book from behind my back and said, 'Right, read this!' Six months later I met him and asked if he had read the book. 'No!' he replied. I said, 'You're making progress!'

(From a letter, October 2005)

* 1975, Herbert Fensterheim and Jean Baer.

9 **That's one reason for writing**

I was writing a sort of potpourri of thoughts and reflections, with no real purpose, beyond that of occupying myself on a rainy afternoon and keeping a troublesome dose of the blues and heebie-jeebies at bay.

(From 'Wakey, Wakey!', story in *Life With Fred*, Vol. 2)

10 **My first conscious experience of Lucille's gifts**

'... It was one evening five years ago ... I decided to get down on paper some issues that I needed to deal with. But neither the customary clarity nor the necessary cues from the intellect and the emotions nor the appropriate words materialised, and I struggled to write the piece that was subsequently to become the foundation stone of my collection ... I doodled aimlessly for a while then tried to put stuff into rhyme but nothing would rhyme, then tried straight prose but the prose wouldn't stay straight. But, amazingly, I was about to give up in frustration when I experienced what I can only describe as an intuitive nudge, and the words started to flow onto the paper as if somebody had just turned on a magic tap.'

(From 'In The Beginning ...', story in *Life With Lucille*)

11 **Values**

When I categorise aspects of my behaviour – thoughts and feelings, actions and reactions – into 'good' and 'bad', I do so on the basis of an inherited set of values. These are not necessarily appropriate to me in my situation *now*. In order to find and maintain my deepest personal integrity (i.e. that safe place inside me where I am always content with the truism 'I am who I am' – and the gift of God to me), I need the internal arbiter emanating from (yet paradoxically extrinsic to) the essence of who I am, transcending conditioning, even genetic factors. This sounds like gobbledegook but it is really quite simple: the gift of *who I am* is given directly by God and resides in the indestructible essence at the core of my being.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

12 **How did Lucille become a Muse?**

‘I have often wondered, my dearest Lucille, how you became a Muse in the first place. Not everybody’s cup of tea or glass of nectar, I would have thought.’

‘You’re right. Coming up with new ideas all the time can be pretty trying except, of course, when one is working with a wonderful writer like you. Anyway, there were nine of us, all girls, and my father, Zeus – wonderful god but a bit of a stickler for duty – said that he wasn’t going to have us hanging around twiddling our thumbs and that we had to earn our keep, although a few of us had tried a bit of this and a bit of that. I worked with Hippocrates for a while but it wasn’t my thing, long term. So Dad consulted some of his fellow deities who had come to a conference on Mount Olympus, and they came up with this Muse idea. He saw the potential and jumped at it. In fairness you have to hand it to him. Look at all the wonderful stuff that I and my sisters have inspired since then. He’s never really been given the recognition he’s due in this respect. In a very real sense, he’s the Father of Literature and much more besides.’

‘I love to hear someone speak well of their parents. It does you credit, Lucille. Did you have to do an apprenticeship or were you thrown in at the deep end?’

‘Apprenticeship of sorts. I started with a minor romantic poet in about nine hundred and fifty BC and progressed from there. You’ll be interested to hear that, considerably later of course, I spent quite some time with both Jane Austen and P.G. Wodehouse. Lovely people, great writers.’

‘Really?’ I exclaimed, amazed. ‘They’re my favourite authors – after myself, that is.’

‘I know; that’s why I mentioned it; this shared affection is probably one of the many reasons why we eventually found each other.’

(From ‘Vocation’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

13 **An existential question**

Here you have it: by far the most burning and troublesome of all existential questions: ‘Who am I?’

The answer, for me, is simplicity itself. ‘I am who I am’, or put even more simply, ‘I am.’ This answer satisfies me absolutely.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

14 **Save us from the well-meaning!**

When people tell me what is wrong with me, what my problem is and what I ought to do about it, frequently they are telling me their own story – giving me excerpts from their own autobiography as it were – and it has little or nothing to do with me. As Anthony de Mello* said: *We see others as we are, not as they are*. He sure said a mouthful! Now that I have become aware of this facet of human personality, I am astonished at how frequently it manifests, and not alone with people telling me what’s wrong with me. More often, people give me sincere, well-meant, positive advice and I quickly perceive that it suits them to a tee but is light years removed from what I need. It is worthy of note that being a trained and experienced professional in the field of ‘things of the mind’ confers no exemption from this aspect of the human condition ...

Thankfully, particularly in recent years, I notice that people rarely have a go at me or give me ‘good advice’. This is partially because I am not around as many people since I gave up full-time work but also, I believe, because they may now be picking up from me the non-verbal message that I won’t accept *their* negative stuff and don’t need *their* positive stuff. As against that, I truly value friends who are willing to tell me openly about their lives – their journey if you prefer – and who grant me the invaluable freedom to draw my own lessons from their experiences if I so wish.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* 1931–1987. Indian Jesuit priest, psychotherapist, spiritual teacher, writer and public speaker.

15 **Losing hope?**

Losing hope is not something that happens to us; it's a choice that we make. No matter how bleak our situation, making the right choice determines whether we are crushed by it or, trusting as best we humanly can in One higher than us, we begin to transcend it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

16 **The question that comes to everybody sooner or later**

'I don't want to sound like a frustrated existentialist, Dad, but when all's said and done, what the hell is life all about?'

'You know, Greg, a friend of mine asked me that very question only the other day, and it came to me just how well my childhood catechism put it: *God made me to know him love him and serve him in this world and be happy with him forever in the next.* See the wisdom? We can't love somebody until we know them, and we won't, unless obliged by circumstance, want to serve if we don't love. More recently, I heard an Eastern teacher put it more succinctly in a way that really appeals to me, and mirrors my own journey: *The purpose of human life is to experience one's oneness with God.* There, my dearest son, you have it in a nutshell.'

(From 'The Dance Goes On', draft sequel to the novel *Black On Magenta*)

17 **Not such a good plan after all**

'Surely you remember that television comedy series some time ago: *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*. He faked his own demise so that he could come back in a new guise, and do his own thing. Wonderful, idea Fred.'

'Wonderful,' agreed my sidekick, morosely; 'but you're overlooking one essential factor: if we engineer our own 'demise' the authorities will stick to the rule book and discontinue your annual stipend. Unfair I know, but they're a bit reluctant to fork out salaries to the deceased.'

(From 'To Be Continued', story in *Life With Fred*)

18 **Start writing and you often don't foresee the outcome**

A year or so ago, I wrote a lovely poem about tears. In the last few days I recalled how it came about: some time earlier, I had seen a quotation about the beauty of tears by Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese poet, and decided that I would like to have the quote to refer to. When I found it, however, it was too long and was not quite as I remembered it. So, I said 'Why not write a two-liner yourself?' Well, I set to work and, before I knew, it became a poem in its own right.*

(From a letter, November 2005)

* 'The Way Of Tears' in *Beyond The Illusion*.

19 **Is competitiveness the way?**

In earlier life, I was as competitive – in certain fields – as anybody else. Now, here is an interesting question: was it my nature to be competitive, or was I conditioned by the society in which I live? More recently I have been seriously questioning the wisdom of the ways in which people have always pitted themselves – or have always been unwillingly pitted – against one another in competition, from a simple game of tiddlywinks to a full-scale war.

(From 'Are We Meant To Be Competitive?', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

20 **Personal wholeness**

'Too long, far too long, have I considered myself a random collection of cells, thoughts, emotions and experiences, both good and bad. Only now can I perceive the myriad components of my existence as the notes of a profound and beautiful composition, an opus of melody and harmony in many movements – some slow and ponderous, others lively and exciting, but each sublime in its own way. Thankfully, there is still time to play – and rejoice in – the symphony of my life.'

(From Part 8 of *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*, 3rd edn)

21 **What if?**

What if there aren't separate positive and negative energies, that all energy comes from the same source, and that this energy is totally good? And if so, is this sole energy pure love? I believe so. It becomes negative only when transmuted, mis-used or perverted in some way; but the source remains pure.

For example:

- ✧ The same energy powers both warships and life boats.
- ✧ Electricity provides access to child pornography on the internet and also powers life-saving equipment in hospitals.
- ✧ Genetic research is potentially capable of producing immense benefits and also great evil ...

Julian of Norwich* said: *In the end everything will be love.* Drawing on the first words of John's Gospel and on my own intuition, I may safely infer that 'in the beginning everything was love'. From there one can postulate that in between the 'beginning' and the 'end' there is also only love, but we have choice as to what we do with it. Some choose to pervert it. As an extreme example, Hitler chose to use his passionate love of a particular ideology to exterminate millions of innocent people. Lest religions become sanctimonious on this issue, let us recall that one does not have to look far to find atrocities perpetrated by various religions in the name of 'God', and if we accept that God is love, these barbaric acts were carried out in the name of 'Love'. The very notion is sickening.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* c. 1342–1416. English mystic; the first woman known to have written in English.

22 **I can't do this alone**

I've missed my cue
And need assistance;
That's nothing new,
It shows consistence!

(From 'Only You', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

23 **Love and hate**

I chose *Love Is The Essence* as the title for this combined edition* because the concept is very dear to me. Julian of Norwich said, *In the end everything will be love*. It certainly doesn't seem like everything is love now – before the end – though, does it? My perspective is that love is all-pervading and with us all the time. However, what one witnesses frequently in this world is a distortion, sometimes a gross perversion, of that beautiful energy. The old dictum that there is only a very thin dividing line between love and hate is pretty close to the mark, not because love is akin to hate, but because love perverted becomes hate. I emphasise that this is only my way of seeing it, and I have no desire to convince anybody else to view it in the same way. Whatever comes or goes, whatever life may present, whatever perspective is conferred by outward appearance or passing circumstance, for me love is always the essence. Most of my poems, regardless of the apparent theme, speak to this perspective ...

Chatting with my dear wife, Carmel, one evening, I said, 'How is it that it always seems to be men who give flowers to women? Men like flowers too, you know!' A while later, on my sixty-second birthday, she presented me with ten red roses. Now, that's love! Whenever we have had roses in the house in the past, they have never lasted for very long, but wilted and died. On this occasion, however, one of the roses dried out perfectly and remains intact to this day, as if it were saying: 'Everything else may die, but love never dies, for love is the essence.'

(From the Introduction to *Love Is The Essence*)

* A compendium edition of three other privately produced collections of poems: *The Substance Of Dreams*, *From The Cradle Of Eternity* and *Beyond the Illusion*.

24 **Favourite poems**

A selection of favourites, then. And the top three? 'The Dance Of Forever', 'The Bluebell' and 'Love's Journey', in that order.

(From the Introduction to *A Little Of What I Fancy*)

25 **A touch of romance**

'Be my little Valentine.'
'I can't, my name is Ann.'
'You twig me not, 'tis but a phrase,
Means "Love me, if you can".'
'Ah, now I see, it's all quite clear:
You've fallen for my charms,
But know that it's not any man
I take into my arms.'
'There is no need to go that far;
I crave no haste undue,
But surely 'twould not be a sin
To steal a kiss from you.'
'Gracious no, that cannot be,
I scarcely know your name;
Stealing is a monstrous crime,
And love is not a game ...
Oh dear, you're sad; let's compromise,
And take it not amiss,
But you won't have to steal at all
If I give you the kiss.'

(*'Change Of Heart'*, poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

26 **Early years**

Born in London in April 1942, in the middle of the Second World War, I was an only child. After me, my mother had three miscarriages and a stillborn child. Therefore I never had the rough and tumble of siblings to help toughen me up. Coupled to this, I was a sensitive child and was afraid of my father.* I don't know why this is so, as my father was always kind to me. There was no support or counselling available for my mother in those days and I later drew two conclusions: 1) These losses must have caused her great grief; 2) Being a sensitive child, I probably picked up on her pain. That's certainly the way it felt in later life.

(From 'Ken's Story', a short account of my life in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

* The information in this sentence came from an aunt in about 2006.

27 **How do fairies fly?**

‘How *do* you fly then?’ [i.e. if you don’t have wings]

‘I don’t know. I just fly. I mean, it’s kind of a silly question. Have you ever stopped to ask yourself, “How do I walk?”’

‘No, now that I think of it, I haven’t. I suppose I’ve sort of taken it for granted, which is not to my credit. But the thing is I know precious little about fairies’ lifestyle, except what I learned as a child, and that’s probably all make-believe, so I’m curious. It must be done by some sort of magic fairy will power then.’

‘Perhaps that’s how it works. When I have to go somewhere, I just take off and, *voilà*, I flit trouble-free from A to B, so to speak. Hmm! Like you with the walking, I’ve obviously been taking my ability to fly for granted. Now that you bring it up, it really is quite something, isn’t it? A terrific gift in fact.’

‘You can say that again. I wish I could fly.’

‘Well, hang around with me for long enough, and who knows!’

(From ‘Mirth And Moisture’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

28 **The simple life**

I was talking to one of my sons recently, and the conversation turned to cars. I said, ‘Well I am very happy with the car I have, but if I were tempted to go for something a little more exotic, I might have a look at an Audi Q3.’

The whole conversation was light-hearted of course. He responded by encouraging me to consider getting one, even maybe a used model as I don’t do high mileage. I replied that I wasn’t really serious about it.

‘Ah, go on, Dad!’

‘Hmmm! Give me a mountain in Connemara* during the day, and a laptop and a few ideas in the evening, and I am as a happy as if I had ten Q3s.’

And that’s the truth of the matter.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* A rugged but beautiful region in the West of Ireland.

29 **Lucille summarises my approach to writing**

‘This won’t take long. Let me see if I can summarise your approach to writing, adding in one or two bits that I know from my experience of you. Write to nurture yourself, for the sheer enjoyment of it. Publication, if any, is merely a welcome bonus. Even if you can think of nothing to say, open your notebook, and write the first thing that comes into your mind; it may not even appear in the final version, but it gets you going. Except on the seldom occasion when you know exactly what you want to say, let the writing lead you to its own conclusion. Refine your work by reading it out loud and keep changing it until it sounds right, bringing in new ideas that occur to you after the first draft. Finally, and may I say crucially, trust your Muse. Have I left anything out?’

(From ‘Giving Satisfaction’ story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

30 **Omission taken care of**

I was in my study, putting the finishing touches to the story ‘Whose Tree?’ which, as you will know if you have been following my movements recently, is the tale of how I came to meet the pretty little fairy in the last two days, and how we came to share the lovely silver birch tree in the garden woodland.

‘Yes,’ I said to myself, but out loud. ‘I like the way this story is turning out.’ But something was bothering me, and it took me a few minutes to figure out what it was. ‘I don’t believe it,’ I said, speaking to an empty room. ‘I never asked her what her name is. I don’t know if I’ll ever see her again. She has shared her tree with me, that’s true, but fairies don’t often appear to humans. Oh dear! I should have asked her name. I would just like to know, that’s all. Now I may never find out. What a pity!’

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. After a few moments, I must have drifted into a doze, because I knew there was nobody else in the study with me, but I heard a voice saying, ‘My name is Jasmine.’

(From ‘Patience Is A Virtue’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

31 **Finite intellect**

I have written many times about the inappropriateness – I would almost go so far as to say the insanity – of trying to decipher the infinite, the spiritual, the Divine, with the finite, human intellect. Time and time again, I have experienced that stupendous beauty in a realm that is beyond the intellect, largely outside the senses and which transcends language. And if, on seldom occasions, I try to tell others of it, I am almost always disbelieved because it does not compute with the other person's intellect. That said, the intellect is of service in acknowledging the beauty and wonder of the spiritual and in attempting a very limited, though hopefully worthwhile, description of it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

32 **A question and an answer**

'There is nothing to be said
That I have not said before,
But this I'll say once more:
Why are you so silent
When I am most in need,
When circumstance indeed
Asks more than I can offer,
And it's more than I can bear
To believe you do not care?'

'There is no need to question
For I know that you've discovered
The muted voice within,
Which, although no word is uttered,
Speaks endlessly of love
To the essence of your being,
Of the love that you are seeing
In the beauty all around you
And the wonder deep inside.
What more, then, could you need?'

(‘Eloquent Silence’, poem in *The Power Of Light*)

33 The eye of the spirit and the eyes of the body

I have discovered, to my astonishment, that the eye of the spirit is far more accurate in what it sees than the eyes of the body. The most obvious example of how the eyes of the body can be deluded is a mirage in the desert. But it can happen in ordinary, everyday things. Two people witness an occurrence from the same vantage point and see quite different circumstances.

The eyes of the body start functioning shortly after birth, but it has been my experience that the fine-tuning of the eye of the spirit takes decades. Interestingly, for me the two often appear to work in tandem. Often I see something with the eye of the spirit that is not available to my human eyes, yet when I close them, I do not see what the eye of the spirit was seeing quite as clearly.

But, as I say, by far the most amazing thing is the accuracy of the eye of the spirit. Once past the fine-tuning period, it does not deceive.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

34 A beautiful spirituality for us – and our children

It is an undeniable fact that our priorities and needs change over our lifetime, and what supported us in our prime may utterly fail us in later years. And, bluntly put, one day we will die and leave it all behind us. Is there anything that endures? The answer proffered by this writer is a decided *yes*. While I never disclose the details, it is no secret to my circle of acquaintance that I have found an astonishingly beautiful spirituality which is present to me even in the darkest hours. If it were possible, I would share it with the whole world, but that's not the way it works, and few would believe me anyway. Each person must find his or her own path. Let us, then, give our children a chance now to find a way of untold value later on. They may not choose to seek, but we will have opened the door for them and need have no regrets.

(From 'Higher Values For Our Children?', essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

35 **Little fairy lost**

'I'm very glad you're here, Jasmine. But do you mean you flew all the way from the woodland – must be at least twenty kilometres – just to ask me my name?'

'Well, yes and no. Yes, I did want to find out your name. And no, that's not the only reason I came.'

'Make yourself comfortable, and tell me all,' I invited.

She didn't say anything for a couple of minutes. Nor did I. I sort of knew she needed the silence to gather her thoughts.

'This is a bit embarrassing,' she began. 'As you probably know, there are different types of fairy.'

Actually I didn't know that, but I stayed silent so as not to interrupt her.

'Yes, there are,' she said, reading my thoughts. 'For example, you have the Tooth Fairies who do wonderful work, the Christmas Fairies who help Santa with the presents, the Woodland, River and Mountain Fairies, to name but a few, who look after Nature. There are many others too, but that will give you an idea.'

'And which group of fairies do you belong to, Jasmine?'

She blushed. 'That's the embarrassing part. I don't know!'

(From 'Patience Is A Virtue', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

36 **Fred gets the better of me**

Did you ever get caught in your own trap? It is not a pleasant experience. I knew I was beaten, so I did the only thing that one with my phenomenal intellect could reasonably do in such a circumstance: I stuck out my tongue at him, simultaneously emulating the sound of flatulence, like a child who, outmanoeuvred, lacks the skill and vocabulary to deal with it, and I thought I had had the last 'word'. Alas, regression to childhood is not confined to one side of the brain. Fred imitated my infantile performance adding, in a triumphal tone, 'Same to you, with knobs on!'

I've never heard any child successfully top that, so I just pouted moodily and sulked.

(From 'With Knobs On', story in *Life With Fred*)

37 **Separateness versus seamlessness**

By comparison to some earlier cultures, where there was a kind of fluency between the various aspects of existence, we now live in a world of separation: heaven and Earth, temporal and eternal, church and state, material and spiritual, natural and artificial, The fullness of Nature and the emptiness of Space, one religious/political/philosophical system versus another, our inner selves and our outer lives, and so on. The longer I am around, the more I experience a ... what to call it? 'Oneness' won't do ... I think it's more of a 'Seamlessness' between all, or at least many, of these disparities, where I can flow from one to the other, at least in spirit and imagination, rather than seeing barriers in my way. Beyond that, I'd be hard put to explain it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

38 **Our problems in perspective**

I am an egg – a potential chicken, if you prefer – highly valued, so I'm told, in certain circles; but my lot is not a happy one.

At the outset of my brief existence, some feathered, flightless, overfed twit who passes herself off as my mother, forces me, willy-nilly, through an excruciatingly tight orifice anything but adequately designed to afford an easy passage to my rotund dimensions and delicate structure ...

But the ultimate insult comes when they condemn what is left of me to spend the autumn of my life with common household garbage. And you think you've got problems.

(From 'An Egg's Lament', story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

39 **It's all in the mind – I think!**

Benjamin Disraeli is reported as having once asked a duchess in her eighties at what age a woman ceases to feel passion. 'Young man,' she responded, 'if you want an answer to that question, you must ask an older woman than me.'

(From 'Live And Let Live', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

40 **Do I have an open mind?**

Since I became aware, probably in mid-teenage, that such a condition was considered the mark of an enlightened human being, I recall having been exhorted in various ways and by various people and at various times to keep an open mind. On such occasions I would invariably say to myself: 'But Ken, you *always* keep an open mind.' Now that I am literally bowed down with the weight of life's experience, I can see that most of the time I had anything but an open mind. The moment somebody said something that triggered a prejudice or offered a perception that was at variance with my view of the world, or simply presented an appearance or attitude that I didn't like, the shutters came down and I switched off. Alternatively I would make judgements on the speaker in order to make myself feel superior or protect myself from viewpoints that threatened my comfort zone. The only consolation I draw from this dismal, closed-minded performance is that I was in very good company, always assuming that one considers almost everybody else on the planet good company. In short, the man or woman with a truly open mind is a rare phenomenon.

(From 'Minding The Open Mind', essay in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

41 **Living external lives**

We live in an age of information saturation, excessive stimulation and sensory overload. Hence, our brains, emotions, nervous systems, indeed our entire beings are over-energised to the point where many folk cannot be still or left too long with their own thoughts. The result seems to be that, although it might appear desirable in theory, the simple life is unattainable, and there is precious little possibility for true peace of mind. The quest is frequent excitement and the idea of developing an inner life may be dull and boring. Such a shame and a loss to the world. The inner life is where the real and permanent and life-giving excitement is.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

42 **Point of no return**

Here's an excellent piece of advice that I was given a few years ago – not before time as will be seen: never lend a book unless you can afford to lose it.

What is it about books? I have a good number of friends who are the epitome of integrity and honest almost to a fault, and if I were to lend them a thimble, they would go to endless lengths to get it back to me the second they had finished with it. But lend them a volume from my library and it's ... well, bye bye book! There are gaping spaces on my shelves awaiting the repatriation of favourites which, in reality, will never see their home and owner again. Eventually, when the aforesaid advice took root, I got sense and stemmed the outflow of print items from my study. Nowadays, if I perceive that a friend could really benefit from reading a book that is in my possession, or they ask to borrow one, I source a second-hand copy on the internet, and give them that, with no request for it to be returned.

I have never been able to figure out this strange facet of the human condition. It seems that most folk, apparently normal in every other way, are missing the book-returning gene. It must be an aberration in our evolution.

What's that? While you're reading this little piece, you are feeling increasingly uncomfortable and going red in the face? Well, just give me my book back, and you'll feel much better.

Postscript: My dismal experience with books is as I have just related. Fortunately, early in my sojourn on the planet, I was given the wisdom to know that there are four things I must never lend, and I never have: my record collection, my car, my toothbrush and my wife.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

43 **Mind your language!**

'Should' and 'should not' – surely two of the most powerful linguistic tools of torture ever devised for they create little more than destructive guilt.

(From 'All For Love', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

44 **New arrival**

I am enclosing a couple of photographs of Scamp. I think you will like him; he has a very nice nature and is learning quickly, also growing at a very fast rate ... I've taken to bringing him for walks down by the river in the mornings and am getting (reluctantly!) quite attached to him. He's good company, the little fellow. I wasn't overjoyed, however, when he stripped away two of my ivy plants – growing up the wall outside the kitchen, and he has taken a particular shine to one flower bed which he keeps digging up. He'll grow out of it, I suppose. I hope, for his sake, that he does, or else he'll have a sore arse for the rest of his life from the impact of my shoe.

(From a letter, August 1995)

45 **If only it would last ...**

'I really enjoyed that, Fred. Nothing like a few lengths of the well chlorinated, a sojourn in the steam room and a soak in the Jacuzzi to clear out the cobwebs and recharge the batteries.'

'Yes,' agreed Fred, 'terrific. I feel revitalised, invigorated and so forth.'

'Hmmm!' I murmured pensively.

'Why the ponderous "Hmmm!"?' queried my psychic sidekick.

'I was just thinking what a pity it is that we can't feel this good all or at least most of the time, Fred; but this post-immersion sense of well-being is all too fleeting ...'

(From 'Deep End', story in *Life With Fred*)

46 **The truth will out**

Though outwardly a full-grown man
Who plays the adult best he can,
With you can I discard this pose
And in your arms the truth disclose:
In fact, I'm but a child.

(From 'Back To Basics', poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

47 **Lucille can't really get cross**

'Bit of a change in the weather, old thing; a good bit cooler, but still nice.'

'Yes,' said Lucille. 'Quite autumny really.'

'Gracious me, cherished Muse, you disappoint me. It's not like you to make that kind of mistake. "Autumnal" is the correct term. "Autumny" isn't a word, for goodness' sake.'

'It is now,' returned the Muse of Muses, a trifle sharply. I say a trifle because Lucille can never get really cross. 'May I suggest, pedantic one,' she continued, 'that people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Alone in your poem "The Bluebell" you employ three words that no dictionary will authenticate. So there!' Lucille had a look on her delightful face that was a mixture of feigned injured pride, coquettishness and good humour. In short, she looked cute.

(From 'Lexicographers', story in *Life With Lucille*)

48 **Being content with what is**

All of my four adult children – three sons and one daughter – are taller than me. When they were quite young, one of them asked me one day, 'Dad, if you could be any height you wanted, what height would you be?'

I reflected for a few moments, then replied, 'I think I'd like to be five feet nine.'

'And what height are you, Dad?'

'Five feet nine.'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

49 **Love and let live**

'Live and let live' is a pretty popular motto, and I do my level best to live by it. More recently, though, the thought struck me that if I am to live to good purpose myself and then let others be who they are, I cannot do that without being loving toward myself and them. Thus, I sometimes say 'Love and let live'. Makes me feel better.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

50 **Tough love? No thanks!**

The so-called ‘tough love’ type of teaching, friendship, therapy, mentoring or pastoring, where the well-meaning give me a piece of their mind or a portion of their potted philosophies or confront me with my issues (which, if the truth were known, are frequently *their* issues) ‘for my own good’, is about as helpful as thumping me between the two eyes with a sledgehammer to cure a headache. But give me even a tiny dose of TLC and I blossom. And God save me from the well-meaning!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

51 **Understanding timelessness**

Years ago, I would have said that I could never possibly understand the concept of timelessness while I am still in this dimension. Over a long period, however, I have been drawn into an experience of timelessness which would be impossible for me to put into language.

However, it is possible to create a word picture that gives a tiny insight into this state. I am in the present, but my memories are in the past. That seems okay, but is not quite accurate. My memories are *from* the past, but they are not *in* the past. When I recall them in the here and now, they become a part of my present. Who has not felt the joy or pain of past experiences when they are called into the present moment? This isn’t just a mind game: the memories are now an integral part of my present experience. If a memory causes me, let us say, great joy in the moment, it would be utterly illogical to say something like, ‘I travelled back forty years so that I could relive that moment.’ My memory retrieved the joyful experience from forty years ago, but I am reliving it in the present. Timelessness renders everything in the now, while not dishonouring the past in the traditional sense, but it does so on a stupendously greater scale than the words I have just used could ever represent.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

52 **A land of make-believe**

The distant land, of which I am about to relate, nestles high up in the mountains in a remote part of the planet, bypassed by the modern world and, because of the inaccessible location and the apparently alien lifestyle of the people, has been visited by very few outsiders. I am one such, and am greatly privileged to have been able to make the journey, for I learned there one of the most important lessons of my life.

All the inhabitants are magicians. This is as natural to them as the green grass, the mountain peaks and the clouds in the sky. They would no more find it expedient to say to their neighbour 'I am a magician' than I would find it necessary to explain to a friend that I am a human being. It is their whole way of existence. In other respects they conduct their lives much as we do, practising various professions, bringing up their families, engaging in social activities and so on. The one major difference is that where we have to carry out a series of actions to accomplish a task, they merely weave a magic spell and *voilà!* At a very early age they are introduced to the simplest formulas, and their education proceeds from there.

(From 'Back To The Source', story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

53 **A writer's frustration**

Oh, hell! Here we are again; at least I'm here, whatever about you, and, regrettably, I've been here before, desperately wanting to write something meaningful, if for no better reason than that writing is my hobby, and a fellow likes to be occupied with his hobby, doesn't he? But once again inspiration, curse it, fails me. I think I'll give up this confounded penmanship and take up something less frustrating, like tiddlywinks, although, come to think of it, that has its ups and downs too. I wish I had a fiver for every time, as a child, I aimed carefully for the authorised receptacle in the middle of the table, only to have the little plastic disc finish up in the milk jug or the sugar bowl, and I had to fish it out furtively, in order to avoid the censure of the parent on duty.

(From 'High Dudgeon', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

54 **The rebellious dieter**

This is my third cup of coffee,
Worse, four sugar lumps in each one,
Worse still, topped with a thick layer of cream,
And I shouldn't be drinking the stuff at all.
The doctor said so.
Not good for me, he said.
But what does he know?
Probably only barely passed his final examinations.
His fancy diets and penal limitations,
Copious lotions, pills and potions
Know nothing of my real need,
And, hence, have not half the therapeutic value
Of a little – or more – of what I fancy:
A hefty self-prescribed intake of caffeine
Mixed with a liberal dose of rebellion.
So let's have another cup,
And up yours, Doc!

(‘Out Of Line’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

55 **Treasure deep inside**

A tear stole out of the corner of one eye and meandered slowly down his cheek. He always reacted in this way to the mystical. Because he experienced it on a moment-to-moment basis, he knew, without the slightest shadow of doubt, in a realm beyond the intellect and the senses, that this third layer was his spirit, at the core of which was an indestructible essence, and that it did indeed reach to eternity. Here was his limitless store of unconditional love – first received, then given. Here were his deep caring and compassion for his fellow men and women. Here was his profound yearning that every last soul could come to know the All-That-Is as he did. Here was the sublimely beautiful reality of which his surface layer was but a reflection. Here, at the third level, was his true self.

(From ‘Beware The Ring Of Truth’, story in *Oh, My Head!*)

56 **Writing is like a drug**

Writing is like a drug; once it gets into your system, you become hooked on it and need a regular, virtually daily, fix. That is why it is very frustrating when I desperately want to pen a few lines, but can't think of anything to say. Then I suffer withdrawal symptoms: the aforementioned frustration, restlessness, impatience, irritability and a touch of the blues. The worst time I have known in this regard was a four-year period between 2008 and 2012 when I wrote hardly anything. It all just dried up, and I went into a serious decline!

It's odd how it came back. In mid-October 2012, I was out in Brigit's Garden,* and the woman who runs the amenity told me they were having a fun night, including storytelling, for both children and adults on Halloween night. She asked me if I had anything suitable. When I said that I hadn't, she suggested that I might write something specially. I told her I would see, but said to myself, 'No way! Writing's all dried up. Nothing doing.'

A few days later, I was waiting in the Revenue office to submit my annual tax return, when I spontaneously took a notebook out of my briefcase and started to write a children's story entitled 'Whose Tree?'. I completed it over the next few days and read it at the Halloween celebrations. It received much positive comment. But, more importantly, it re-ignited the creative fire, and, since then, I have written over twenty stories, a few essays and many reflections for *Perspectives*.

Did I say writing is like a drug? I meant to add that it's a benign drug. It does you good. No toxic side effects. A real gift. Long may the words flow.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Delightful garden based on a Celtic theme, open to the public, in Rosscahill, Co. Galway, Ireland.

57 **A meditation on the human condition**

That's it?
Oh shit!

('Brevity', poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

58 **Labelling**

So, you would like to know who I am? The beautifully uncomplicated answer is this: I am who I am. But many people might wish for something a little more explicit.

In the society in which we live, the way in which we label ourselves or allow ourselves to be labelled is such a pervasive phenomenon, that I wonder how many of us are aware that this is happening and that it dictates how people perceive us.

Let me give you an imaginary example of two people in conversation: ‘Do you know Ken O’Sullivan?’ ‘I don’t think so. What does he do?’ ‘Lecturer in Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology.’ ‘Oh, *that* Ken O’Sullivan. Yes I know him.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ you may ask. Isn’t it obvious? You don’t know *me*, you know my label, and this is but one. Depending on my various relationships with other people, I am a husband, father, father-in-law, grandfather, customer, client, friend, acquaintance, patient, and many more besides. Social labels can be attached too: he’s a loner, she’s gregarious, for example. Also religious ones: he’s a confirmed atheist, she’s a devout Christian. Among the most difficult to shoulder, in my view, are some of the labels that attach to us medically: he’s a diabetic, she’s coeliac, he’s bi-polar, she’s got general anxiety disorder. On the surface, there is nothing intrinsically invalid about any of that; it is our way of dealing with the vast number of people in our circle of acquaintance as we go through life. But it’s artificial; it reduces us to one dimension, or at least a small number of them, when in fact each one of us is an amalgam of a vast array of dimensions.

Therefore, you know me by my labels. If someone asked you to describe *me* – that is, who I am – without using any of the labels by which I am known, you would almost certainly find it quite difficult.

One of my finer achievements, even though I will always be labelled, because that is the way of the world, is to have resisted taking on board most of the negative labels that have been ‘assigned’ to me as I journeyed through life. To hitchhike on my opening paragraph, I am who I am, regardless of any labels.

Nevertheless, let us suppose you were able to cajole me into putting *one* label on myself that most nearly describes me, what would it be? Here it is:

*I am an ineffably beautiful paradox.**

By this, I mean that, in both the sunlight and the shadow of my being, I am a host of sacred contradictions, which together form the eternal oneness that is me. This may sound complex, possibly esoteric, to some maybe even irrational or bizarre; yet, in reality, it is delightfully simple, although it has taken me many years to get to a vantage point where I can see this clearly and come to know, deep within, how incontrovertibly true it is. It is simple because it just means embracing the totality of who I am. Simple, that is, but not easy. Why? Because, in our increasingly alienated society, our penchant for the denial, suppression and replacement of those parts of us we'd rather not acknowledge – and strangely, sometimes, of our gifts and talents also – is almost genetic. By replacement, I mean that we tend to avoid our own realities in favour of becoming the person that we or others think we *ought* to be.

You wanted to know who I really am? I wasn't being in the slightest bit evasive in answering your question, but I don't suppose you're too much the wiser. I sincerely hope I'm wrong in saying that.

(From 'Labelling', essay in *Reality And Illusion & Other Essays*)

* As we all are – but each in his or her own unique way.

59 **Spiritual growth and pain**

Spiritual growth is not about getting rid of pain; it is about learning the lessons that pain offers and then transcending it. By this I mean that, even when transformed by my personal life experience, the pain remains in some guise, but it becomes the fertile soil in which the miracles can grow rather than the quicksand which swallows me up. Then, in due season, when I look at my 'garden' in full bloom I see the rainbow colours of a million flowers, not the dull brown of the soil underneath, even though it is still there.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

60 **When trouble strikes**

When the emotional trouble strikes, I do something physical, even like the washing up or the hoovering. A twenty-minute *brisk* walk has the soothing effects of a tranquilliser without the harmful side effects. I find swimming in the sea one of the best therapies I have ever tried, and I do it on a daily basis, year round. I am not alone getting exercise and relaxation, but also the therapy of the water – and it’s not stressful. Sea water is best, but if you don’t live near the sea, a pool is pretty good too. Failing that, a long, cold shower is the next best – if you can stand it! But don’t let it become torture.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

61 **Will men ever find out?**

Anyway, to cut a short story shorter, I did the only thing a sensible chap in my situation could do: appeal to the one person who could throw light on the subject, who could dispel the bewilderment and restore my sense of self-esteem, who, doubtless, in a few well-chosen words, would put this aspect of the battle of the sexes in its proper perspective.

‘Lucille,’ I called out. ‘Can you spare me a few moments?’ She replied in the affirmative as she always does, the loyal thing, and I proceeded to place before her the position of affairs to which my reader is already privy. ‘In short, precious Muse,’ I concluded, ‘I know absolutely nothing about women.’ I raised an inquiring eyebrow and looked at her expectantly.

‘That,’ said Lucille, with an inscrutable smile, ‘is the only thing you need to know!’

(From ‘A Little Knowledge ...’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

62 **Not heeding the inner voice when it talks sense**

Having quashed Fred’s first aid attempts, I sat and brooded, then I sulked, indulged in considerable quantities of self-pity and generally, emulating an obscenely self-indulgent hippopotamus up to its eyes in mud, wallowed in misery.

(From ‘About Turn’, story in *Life With Fred*)

63 **Impressions of a poetry masterclass**

In an innocent quest for new strategies,
A composer of musical comedies,
Mistakenly switching identities,
Attends a symposium on symphonies,
And, using incongruous metaphors
In apt retroactive rebellion,
Looks on in horror,
And nameless foreboding,
Awaiting, in terror,
The cut of the scalpel,
As self-styled physicians
Perform major surgery,
Without anaesthetic,
On healthy embryos.

(‘Anatomy Lesson’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

64 **Language is so limited**

I wonder if you have noticed the seemingly interminable number of ways in which to say ‘Yes’. The version used by the co-occupier of the steam room, which I had entered a minute earlier, was particularly enigmatic, if that’s the word I’m looking for. It left one not knowing if one was making progress in trying to establish diplomatic relations or not.

(From ‘All Steamed Up’, story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

65 **Good is its own reward**

‘What does that mean, Mum: good is its own reward?’

‘In the world in which we live, my son, we are often falsely led to do things for other people only when it will benefit us. I suppose it’s a fact that when we are kind to other people, we feel better about ourselves. In ways that I cannot fully explain, doing good purely for its own sake brings rich rewards deep inside us – the most important place. Everything outside us does not last.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

66 **Courtesy**

A man has no more right to say an uncivil thing to another man than he has to knock him down.

(Dr Samuel Johnson)

Christianity calls the body the temple of the Holy Spirit; Hinduism speaks of the Self as being the finest essence, Buddhism of every being as having the Buddha nature, and Islam of God breathing his Spirit into man.

Being courteous, then – acknowledging the very person of the man, woman or child with whom we are interacting, acknowledging the presence of the Divine deep within them by simply saying a sincere ‘Hello’, ‘Good morning’, ‘How are you?’, ‘Please’, ‘Thank you’, smiling and, importantly, making eye contact – is one of the most spiritual things we can do.

Sadly, in the society in which I live, courteous behaviour is rapidly disappearing and bears witness to a simultaneous loss of awareness of the importance of spiritual and cultural and community values.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

67 **Unconditional giving – applies not only to writing**

The main purpose of this letter is to say something I forgot to say when sending [the poem] ‘The Bluebell’. I hadn’t been writing long when I learned one of the most valuable lessons about my work and it was this: when I give my stuff to anybody, to give it unconditionally. By this I mean please do not feel in any way obliged to comment, say complimentary things etc., on anything I send you. If a particular piece means something to you and you wish to say a word or two about it, that’s a welcome bonus, but I would be happy for you just to feel free to receive the pieces and enjoy them for whatever they may say to you without feeling the need to comment unless you really wish to. I have given away lots of stuff over time because I feel a gift that one has been given should at least attempt to nurture others, but I have learned never to say ‘What did you think?’ or ‘Did you like the piece?’ and so forth.

(From a letter, May 2003)

68 **Two related dreams**

I am in prison. Not a place with high walls but a rambling old house in the centre of a large town. The place is drab and dismal, but the inmates seem okay, if dull and pretty lifeless; they leave me to my own devices and mostly seem to eat or sit around in various lounges. Beyond an inner door, there is a small lobby at the front door; this lobby contains three steps which lead down to the main entrance – a black, heavily planked, old-fashioned door. There is a retaining chain and a large key stuck in the lock. There is no notice saying that it is forbidden to leave; nor is the door alarmed; yet it gives the impression that it is seldom used.

I have to take three steps to get out: 1) remove the chain, 2) turn the key, 3) open the door. I do so.

In the first dream, I take the key with me and, not being sure what to do with it, lock the door from the outside, leaving the key in the lock. There is no hue and cry, no search party to find me and bring me back. It seems that I have been free all along to leave if I so choose. It also seems as if most people in the prison choose not to leave, or are unaware that they have the choice.

In the second dream, I am back in prison. I wasn't 'recaptured', but I realise that, since I had left the key on the outside of the front door, it was in some way inevitable – and simple to accomplish – that I should let myself back in. I let myself back out again, but this time I slide the key in under the front door after locking it. Then I head off around town. It is exciting and vibrant, if not a little scary, but *I am out of prison ...*

As I sat at the breakfast table contemplating these dreams, I realised that, although in the second dream I had pushed the key in under the door, I would still be able to put in my hand and drag it out again. It felt a bit silly but, in my fully awake state there and then, I symbolically put my hand in under the door and flicked the key so far in that I can no longer reach it.

So, I can't go back to prison!

(From 'Appendix F', *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

69 **One of ‘those’ days ...**

‘Things just aren’t right, Fred, they are just not right. I have burnt up several million tons of sincerity and energy for the last century or so, at least that’s what it feels like, taken all the right turnings which turned out to be the wrong turnings, backed all the right horses which turned out to be the wrong horses, did my thing at its thingiest which turned out to be the unthing at its unthingiest. In short, my old shoulder to cry on, despite my best exertions – Nobel prize for effort and all that jazz – I’ve made a monumental mess of everything; well, almost everything.’

‘Creeping shit!’ exclaimed Fred, genuinely concerned. ‘What in heaven’s name triggered that orgy of despair?’

(From ‘About Turn’, story in *Life With Fred*)

70 **Value of the intellect**

I have often commented on the finite nature of the human intellect and the fact that when I have tried to press mine into service to define or decipher the infinite – the Divine – I have always walked straight into a brick wall. That said, the intellect is a very fine, God-given mechanism and renders us many signal services. But it has, I believe, one overriding function namely to *pose the vital questions*. Where I can go astray, if I am not vigilant, is to expect it to provide the answers. Only God can do that.

Incidentally, what are the vital questions? I do not know what they are for others, but for me they are very clear:

- ✧ Who am I?
- ✧ Why am I here?
- ✧ Where am I going?

It is many moons since the God Of My Life provided me with answers to these questions which satisfy me absolutely – and provided them in a realm which is, for the most part, light years beyond the intellect. For this I am grateful beyond measure.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

71 **Each person is unique**

A statement of the obvious that is often overlooked is this: the one thing – the only thing – we all have in common is that we are all different. A certain amount of conformity is necessary so that individuals might coexist as members of a society, but educational, political, legal, religious and philosophical systems have tried to press us into the same mould, to homogenise us, since the genesis of time. The result has been the limiting of the mind, the dulling of the senses, the stifling of creativity and the ‘religionisation’ of spirituality and, ultimately, the ignition of those powerful negative reactions that cause addictions, obsessiveness, bizarre behaviour, rebellion and anarchy.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

72 **Defining solitude**

... and that is how I define solitude for me: *to know the wonder of God’s presence in a dimension beyond the senses or the intellect ...*

Solitude has nothing to do with isolation. At times, I can feel isolated when surrounded by people I know and love. In solitude, however, I am palpably in the presence of the most precious. The truth of the matter is that even when I *feel* isolated, I am not alone. But in the solitude I am enveloped in love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

73 **Old ideas**

I have had to deal with a good number of old ideas about living that are not healthy for me. Here is one example, in this case born of religious conditioning: ‘If I surrender completely to a higher power, that is like giving him permission to make me suffer even more.’ And these old ideas will be revealed to me as and when I am ready to deal with them. I can then replace them with healthier ones. I won’t force it, neither will I delay when the time is right.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

74 **The term ‘God’**

It is of the utmost importance to stress that when I use the term ‘God’, I am alluding to a living, vibrant, all-loving, divine being with whom one can form a sublimely beautiful and enduring one-to-one relationship. An increasing number of scientists and philosophers now believe that there is an Intelligent Design behind the incredible complexities of Nature. It is quite possible to come to this conclusion by intellectual examination and deduction ... That is not what I am talking about here. To repeat myself, because it is central to this essay, but at the risk of insulting your intelligence or trying your patience: *knowledge* of a deep and intimate one-to-one relationship with the Divine (who cares about the tiniest details of our lives and whose love is infinite, steadfast, unconditional and eternal, and is assuredly not just the intellectual notion of some incomprehensible supreme creative Intelligence) comes not from philosophical, scientific or theological analysis and deduction, but from a profound personal experience in the spiritual realm, an experience which almost always transcends limited human logic and language. Such experiences may be electrifyingly sudden, as in my case, but more often they come gradually over time.

(From ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’,
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

75 **A clock with sentimental value**

It had a twenty-four hour movement and, if I forgot to wind it, would press on for two or three hours more, in the hope that I might remember its need to be attended to at regular, daily intervals. Its gentle tick was a comforting sound in my home for many years but, eventually, it began to stop after only twenty hours, then fifteen, then ten until, at last, it would go for just a few minutes before giving up the ghost. I brought it to a clockmaker who opened the back, took one look and shook his head. The clock was not made for longevity, the parts were worn out and would be impossible to replace.

(From ‘Time To Tell’, story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

76 **Yearnings ... Burnings?**

I have written elsewhere about yearnings being much more profound and powerful than ordinary feelings. Feelings come and go, but deep down inside me, in that place that I call ‘the indestructible essence’ at the core of my being, resides a host of irrepressible yearnings, many of which seem to come from beyond my horizons – if that makes any sense, and which keep rising to the surface: things I want to do, projects I wish to accomplish, relationships I desire to nurture, dreams I want to realise, most of all how I want to *be* in the world. They all clamour for my attention; often, it seems, at the same time. And I cannot contain them.

Which of them are real? Which of them are fanciful? Most of all, which of them are attainable? I don’t know; I really don’t know. The only way forward, I believe, is to ask God to remove the yearnings that are not from him, or else they will burn me up. Likewise, I often ask him to empower me to accomplish the ones that are from him, so that I may not depart this world leaving any serious business unfinished.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

77 **No controversies, but ...**

‘We have spoken today of different scriptures, different beliefs. Some of these and others claim exclusive rightness, or at least some of their adherents do. Is there any path that can claim ...?’

‘David, mark my words well: of all subjects, *never* engage anybody on this one. You will only make enemies and add to the controversies that have raged for centuries and thereby do more harm than good. Allow each person the freedom of his or her beliefs without comment. But I will give you a very simple answer that is for your ears only, my dear friend, and it is this: many rivers flow into one sea. All roads, with the exception of those constructed out of human perversity, lead to the eternal realm.’

(From ‘The Dance Goes On’, draft sequel to the novel
Black On Magenta)

78 **Love, infatuation and language**

I have always been fascinated by semantics – the area of linguistics dealing with the meaning of words. As a case in point, I have pondered, from time to time, the riveting question regarding love and infatuation, namely, which is which? No doubt you have often done the same. You haven't? Then you don't know what you're missing, as the ensuing paragraphs will amply demonstrate. Simply put, my theory is that to develop clarity on this matter is virtually impossible. The prerequisite to proving such a theory, I need hardly mention, is to have a pretty firm hold on the appropriate definitions, obtained from an authoritative source. The nearest reputable dictionary to hand at the time of writing bestows the following illumination on the subject:

Love: an affection of the mind caused by that which delights.

Infatuation: an extravagantly foolish or unreasoning passion.

Even the most casual observer will readily see that love is a product of the mind, and the mind, it goes without saying, is associated with reason. Foolish passions, on the other hand, are commonly held to radiate from the heart. Now that all seems pretty straightforward, but you will be interested to learn that it does not tally with the intriguing facts that I, after extensive research, have recently uncovered.

(From 'None The Wiser', story in *When The Bug Bites*)

79 **God's ways are not ours**

It was only on writing the Afterword to the third edition of *Perspectives* in October 2006, that it began to dawn on me that God's way to wholeness – indeed the very meaning/concept of wholeness as he sees it – may well be totally different to mine, and that my views on this subject, so dear to my heart, may need substantial revision. Generally, wholeness denotes a state in which we feel good rather than bad; but, as I have written in another context, I am often not adept at differentiating them. Right then, revision it is; but that can only come from one Source. The journey continues, it seems.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

80 **Murphy's family laws**

- ✧ The sign 'Wet Paint' attracts young fingers like jam attracts wasps.
- ✧ It takes at least 21 years to teach children to say 'Please', 'Thank you' and 'Pardon', and approximately the same length of time for parents to graduate to 'Huh' and 'What?'
- ✧ While salary-earning parents are satisfied with supermarket runners, the penniless youngsters cannot survive without cool foot gear that costs a king's ransom. A sub-clause of this law applies to virtually every bloody thing.
- ✧ Kids who get off the chores because they have a load of study to do, use headphones so as not be found out.
- ✧ Most family members will not check if there is any toilet paper until after they have performed. A similar law relates to the taking of baths and checking on the availability of bath-towels.
- ✧ Kids will normally ask for an advance on their pocket-money early enough in the week to allow time for the parents to have forgotten about it by the weekend.
- ✧ No matter how thoroughly you Hoover the house, you will notice the patch you missed only after you have put the Hoover away.
- ✧ Breast-fed babies frequently turn to the bottle in later years.

(From 'Murphy's Family Laws' in *In My Write Mind*)

81 **No more searching**

I draw you towards love, I endow you with longing ...

(Julian of Norwich)

What I, for many moons, mistook for an ongoing search for God is in fact a deep yearning for more of the God that I have already found. Now, how about that!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

82 **Does size matter?**

A pebble in the shoe generally causes more trouble than a boulder in the back yard.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

83 **The wonder of a new-born baby**

Two days ago (March 2015), we received the wonderful news that we are to be blessed with our seventh grandchild later in the year. Shortly after the birth of each of the other six beautiful grandchildren, I held the little souls in my arms for a while. I could feel their warmth against me; there is something very precious about holding a new-born baby, especially when it is one's own child or grandchild. I have often thought that even if one believed nothing in the spiritual sense, and considered a new-born baby carefully, it would have to do something for you. I mean, nine months ago, there was nothing, now here is this new human being who, within a very short time, will have a unique personality. More than that, the little one will have consciousness, that amazing facet of human existence which science has thus far not been able to explain.* If even one brain cell were inclined to be open-minded, surely you would have to conclude that there must be more than just biology going on here.

A suggestion if I may: next time you have an opportunity to take a tiny baby into your arms, be still and reflect quietly for a few moments. Unless you are obdurately mired in unbelief, like I said it will have to do something for you.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Two examples: The Blue Gene supercomputer developed by IBM is said to be capable of two hundred trillion calculations a second; but it doesn't *know* that it is doing them. A CD player gives us access to the sounds we want to hear, but it cannot evaluate or appreciate the music it is playing. In both cases, there are merely electronic reactions to a command. Awareness, or consciousness, would appear to be uniquely human. For example, not alone am I writing these words, but I *know* that I'm writing them and what purpose I wish them to serve. (Whether or not animals have consciousness is the subject of much debate.)

84 **Bemoaning the possession of a stiff upper lip**

I'm conservative, much too conservative. My parents, poor souls, were obliged to abandon their native soil and depend on the largesse of the neighbouring island for a livelihood. I, as a consequence (though reliably informed that I was conceived on a fine summer's evening in Ballybunion), made my debut in the shire of Surrey, suitably equipped with a stiff upper lip. This component was rendered even stiffer by a solid British education which left me with a strict self-discipline that even teenage repatriation to the land of my ancestors failed to diminish. The fact that I never got around to sowing my wild oats will amply testify to the rigorous self-control imposed by my conditioning. I mean, not even one single oat!

(From 'Kicking Over The Traces', story in *In My Write Mind*)

85 **Professionals don't have all the answers**

In one corner of the extensive and beautiful gardens, stood a forlorn little sunflower in an earthenware pot. The season for it to blossom was well advanced but the rains had persisted for far longer than usual and the sky was filled with leaden clouds during most of each day. The result was that the sunflower was now seriously lacking in the elements it needed for healthy growth and long life.

The gardener, a highly qualified man with many years' experience and greatly respected by his peers, was much concerned for he cared about all the plants in the garden. So he decided to take remedial action, and transplanted the sunflower into a larger pot with a different kind of soil. The following week, he loosened the surface and added some peat moss. A few days later, seeing no improvement, he tied the sunflower to a wooden stake to give it temporary support; of this at least the little flower was glad for its strength was fast failing. Thereafter, at intervals, the gardener fed it with liberal doses of a strong fertiliser and frequently prodded around it with a garden fork in order to aerate the soil.

Sadly, the sunflower continued to deteriorate alarmingly ...

(From 'The Little Sunflower', story in *Oh, My Head!*)

86 **Dying to diet**

I have to confess that it's all totally beyond me. I just can't keep up with the vacillating humours of the almost daily journalistic endeavours to educate health-conscious consumers in matters of nutrition. Today such-and-such is bad for you, tomorrow it isn't. What cures today, it seems, kills tomorrow, and conversely – for those who may be having difficulty following my drift – what kills today, cures tomorrow ...

... Unhappily, I had to attend the sad funeral of a close friend. For many years, he religiously, obsessively, followed the dictates of every dietician who had ever put pen to paper, dutifully abstaining from everything that was bad for him, never deviating, for even one little treat, from the straight and narrow, and eventually, poor chap, martyr to the cause of scientific knowledge, died of starvation.

(From 'Eat, Drink & Be Merry', story in *In My Write Mind*)

87 **When the batteries need recharging**

'Fred, I need a change, a rest, a breather, a sabbatical and a complete break from what I'm doing.'

'Oh! You surprise me. Do you actually do anything, and if anything, is it anything worthwhile?'

I chose to side-step the sniper fire and continue my praiseworthy endeavours to communicate with the ignorant pestilence in at least something akin to a civilised fashion: 'I need, as I was saying, a break from what I've been doing for the last two decades. My batteries badly need recharging. To be absolutely honest, it's not so much a break that I need as a permanent change, but with my commitments, that's not on the cards. Perhaps I could take a year's leave of absence or maybe more. But who'd pay me enough to make ends meet? That's the burning question, Fred: how do I get at least a year off doing something fulfilling, creative and stress-free that would have the desired restorative effect, yet find some kindly and benevolent soul willing to shove sufficient money across the counter to pay all the bills?'

(From 'To Be Continued', story in *Life With Fred*)

88 **Living in harmony**

‘Robert, do you remember, on your last visit here, I pointed out the small spiders on the lake.’

‘David, have a heart; this is no time for a lecture on Nature.’

‘On the contrary, the timing is perfect – and it’s not a lecture. So, do you remember?’

‘Oh, if you insist. Yes, I remember.’

‘What were the little creatures doing?’

‘They were all scurrying across the water without breaking the surface.’

‘Interesting isn’t it? Water is their natural habitat and they live in perfect harmony with it but don’t invade or intrude. It’s not the perfect analogy, of course; there are times when we have to create ripples to deal with the unacceptable. But, generally, if humans followed these spiders’ example, we would have a much happier planet.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

89 **If you don’t like it, lump it!**

I wrote a poem yesterday,
And one the day before,
And, in the days preceding that,
I scribbled several more.

I wrote of this, I wrote of that
And a good bit of the other.
But there’s always something new to say
So I think I’ll write another.

And what’s the topic for today?
And will it aptly fit
The reader’s firm and fertile mind?
You judge; for this is it!

What’s that? ’Tis nought but third-rate crap,
The sort you’d find in sewers?
Well, I respect your point of view;
But, just the same, up yewers!

(‘Another Day, Another Poem’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

90 **Humble – unto what?**

I have more than once read or heard the phrase ‘Humble unto death’, which I presume means to surrender to it. Pretty sound advice of course, given that one has no choice but to die at some point! However, I cannot help but wonder whether some religious teachings imbue their adherents with a morbid attitude to, and hence a fear of, death.

One thing I want to get straight is that I am in no hurry to die; I want to live fully before I do that. But I am not afraid of dying; of the pain that may precede it, yes, but not of dying. The reason is that, for me life is a continuum from my conception in the heart and mind of My God, outside the realms of time and space, to all eternity. At one point on this continuum, there comes an important gateway or transition – that’s all it is – the one we label ‘death’.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

91 **Reaching out – and acceptance**

Like you, I was very absorbed in a career which I loved and in which I was able to help many people. But my heart yearned for more. Out of the blue, in 1989, I started writing seriously, and in only a few years I found myself wishing that the writing could reach out to entertain, but most of all to help those who might come into contact with the work. And what did I do to achieve that? I just kept writing and left the rest to God ... With hindsight though, did I do anything else? Yes, I often said this little prayer: ‘Please don’t let anything or anyone – especially me – get in the way of your plan for my life.’ This means that I had to be willing to let go of my desires if they weren’t his wish for me. When I chase butterflies, I usually don’t catch them; but if I just get on with my life and do the next right thing, the butterfly may come and rest on my shoulder. The other thing I have to do is to try to keep things simple. I used to be far too complex in my thinking for my own good, and generally the simplest way is the best.

(From a letter, May 2012)

92 **Wants and yearnings**

Wants can be eliminated or suppressed but yearnings simply will not go away. To eliminate a yearning (assuming I could do so) would be like amputating an important part of my body that is still functioning perfectly; and attempting to suppress a yearning is like trying to keep in diarrhoea! ...

I have finally concluded that yearnings (as distinctly opposed to wants) constitute an integral, indeed a very beautiful, part of my being, that I *need* them to nurture me in ways that I do not fully understand, and that I am powerless over them. So be it. More than that, thank God for them – for they undoubtedly come from him.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

93 **Life would be just fine, if ...**

Life should have minded its own goddamn business,
Shouldn't it?
Everything was much better before it stuck its blasted nose in,
Wasn't it?

(From 'Fate', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

94 **Two types of acceptance**

Several philosophies recommend acceptance as a strategy for dealing with life's circumstances. And it seems to me that there are two kinds of acceptance, particularly when the circumstances are difficult. The first is white-knuckle, teeth-gritting recognition: 'Okay, so that's the way it is. I don't like it but that's the way it is, damn it!' This kind of acceptance one can just about dredge up from one's own limited resources.

The second kind is where one is at peace with one's current circumstances, once again especially if they are difficult. Here one can say, 'This is the way my life is for the moment, and that's okay with me.' I believe that this kind of acceptance can only come as a gift from God. And if it's a gift, I do well to ask for it on a daily basis.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

95 **My staff!**

You asked me if I dialogue with my inner personalities. Do I what? I have a full-time team in there. You are already familiar with Lucille, my delightful Muse. Then there's Fred, my inner voice, not to mention Jasmine, the latest delightful addition. I have well over two hundred stories about these three. Always present is my Guardian Angel, of course. The committee member who is the most troublesome to deal with is the blankety-blank perfectionist. I have never managed to determine whether this troublesome so-and-so is me, Fred, a hybrid of the two of us, or some other invasive entity, so I have never assigned a name to him beyond, in moments of utter frustration, calling him a pestilential little bollocks!

My daughter, who is the honorary president (and probably the sole member!) of my fan club, rang me recently, and after a while I said, 'Sorry, love, but I have to go. I am very busy at present; I have a staff meeting with Lucille, Fred, Jasmine, my Guardian Angel, The Perfectionist *et alia*.' (See, I do Latin too!)

(From a letter, January 2014)

96 **Strange bedfellows**

'I don't know why, in heaven's name, I come in here. Everything's wrong about it; well, almost everything. The coffee's good. Thereafter, it has all the elements I dislike: television spewing out stuff one doesn't want to watch; that's the bloody trouble with TV – once it's on, it draws your eyes like metal filings to a magnet, even if you don't want to watch it. Then they have loudish piped music as well. One day heating too high, next day it's freezing. But now, here's the strange thing: I can relax here despite all the conditions being against it. Why do you think that is, Lucille?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe we could think it through. Incidentally, you forgot to mention that it's a fast food joint as well, which you don't like either. All the more surprising that you can unwind here.'

(From 'This One's On Me', story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

97 **How powerless am I?**

Unless My Beautiful One so ordains, I won't even be able to take the next breath. Self-propulsion is a non-starter. I am utterly reliant on him. Now that is ultimate personal powerlessness. Yet God chooses to infuse every breath with his infinite, steadfast, unconditional love, thereby empowering me in each moment – the most sublimely beautiful, personal power.

Contradiction? Paradox? It depends on what way one views it. To me it is pure logic – spiritual logic though, which in my experience almost always confounds human logic and comes from the realm of the spirit, not the mind. That is why I have said more than once that seeking to understand, know, fathom, decipher (or whatever word one wishes to employ) the Divine with the finite human intellect is a fruitless exercise.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

98 **Lucille's advice for women**

'Speaking as a woman and a goddess – you not me, that is – and on the basis of nearly three thousand years' experience, Lucille what is the single most important piece of counsel you would pass on to future generations of womankind? Take your time now. This is a weighty question.'

'No need,' responded my cherished Muse instantly. 'I would tell them that whether they live for thirty years or three thousand, to live life one day at a time.'

(From 'Slow Learner', story in *Life With Lucille*)

99 **Lucille's advice for men**

'Speaking as a woman and a goddess – you not me, that is – and on the basis of nearly three thousand years' experience, what is the single most important piece of counsel you would pass on to future generations of men?'

'I would tell them that whether they live for thirty years or three thousand, to live life one day at a time.'

(From 'Slow Learner', story in *Life With Lucille*)

100 **What humility is**

‘Strange virtue humility, if virtue it is, Fred.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Come on Fred, cut the imitation of innocence; you have the same streak of vanity as I do, perhaps more so indeed, if you don’t mind my saying so – perhaps more so indeed even if you do mind my saying so. It is commonly held that humility is the invisible dictator that tells us, if we wish to be considered holy and virtuous in order to reap bounteous rewards hereafter, to lie down and be a door mat allowing the general populace to wipe its feet on us left, right and centre. More than that, it is expected that we will make a vocation of kissing people’s rear ends obsequiously. And, to add insult to injury, it is required of us to turn the other cheek, walk the second mile and so forth and smile sweetly throughout the whole sickening process. In summary, grovel, grovel, grovel, and more grovel. Definitely not my cup of tea; no humility for me.’

‘Hmmm! ...’ said Fred.

‘Is that all you’ve got to say? I had expected one of your smart-ass retorts.’

‘My dear alter ego, that is not what humility is,’ said Fred gently and with more than a hint of extraterrestrial intuition. He does get these hints, you know – rare, mind you; it’s usually me, but I am obliged to admit that he does get them.

‘No doubt,’ I said resignedly, ‘you are proposing to tell me what it is?’

‘Only,’ said Fred, ‘if you want to hear it; and I can guarantee you in advance that when you hear what humility really is, you will positively gasp.’

‘Nonsense Fred; don’t talk rot. I don’t do silly things like that. Get on with it though. I admit to having a certain disinterested curiosity.’

‘Humility,’ proceeded Fred, ‘is having the *correct* estimation of oneself.’

‘Whew!’ I gasped.

(From ‘Humility’, story in *Life With Fred*)

101 **Belief and doubt**

Abraham Low* stated: *A belief is a thought and a thought can be changed.* It follows, then, that when I say I believe something it is not an expression of certainty. Belief, therefore, contrary to the widely held perception that it is carved in stone (particularly religious belief), clearly embodies a significant element of doubt. Indeed, belief can be synonymous with doubt in certain contexts. Knowledge, on the other hand, is based on experience, and experience cannot be denied. Thus, when someone says, ‘I have an unshakeable belief’, it is a contradiction in terms. It is akin to saying, ‘I have an unshakeable, changeable thought!’ or even, ‘I have an unshakeable doubt.’ I imagine that people who meaningfully speak of unshakeable belief are, in reality, speaking of solid experience and are unconcerned with semantic accuracy. Where an experience is in doubt, it does not necessarily mean that the experience itself is in question, rather that it has not yet become solid enough to render the resulting knowledge unassailable.

(From ‘Beliefs, Thoughts And Change’, essay in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

* 1891–1954. Path-breaking American neuropsychiatrist.

102 **Another career?**

‘... I mean, while I in no way judge such worthy mortals, I do not want to be one of those retirees who just lounges in his rocking chair on the verandah, smoking his pipe and having his slippers fetched by the dog, day in and day out until he snuffs it.’

‘We don’t have a dog; not since you gave him away.’

‘Shut up, Fred! That’s not the point. The point is that I want to do something useful with the time that is left to me, undertake some meaningful endeavour, give service to my fellow man, exert myself in some worthy cause and all that sort of thing.’

(From ‘What Now?’, story in *Life With Fred*)

103 **When attachment is not nurturing for us**

I have been reading a book ... by Gerald G. May. He says, quite rightly, that we can be attached or addicted to virtually anything including particular images or representations of God. When I am attached to such an image or representation, my addiction to it prevents me from knowing the reality of God; the addiction obscures the true God, in other words ... So I began to ask myself what is my image of God. I discovered, to my great awe and joy, that I don't have one. I call God by the affectionate name of My Beautiful One, but if you were to ask me to give you a description of My God in any cognitive form, I could not. I experience the infinite, steadfast, unconditional love of God on a moment-to-moment basis. What I experience, therefore, is the love, not any image of God. It seems that, over a long period of time and in painstaking detail, God has been leading me away from any identifiable image or representation of him so that I might experience the reality. As I have said many times, I had nothing to do with this. It came as pure gift from My Beautiful One. My only contribution has been to yearn for it with all my being.

One could argue that humans are capable of being attached to, addicted to, themselves, in the sense that they become very selfish. I believe that, in this case, we become attached not to ourselves but to an image of ourselves. When the dross of the addiction is burnt off (never a completed process in this life) we are left with the real and unified self, free of all attachments. This true self cannot be attached to itself. It simply *is*.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

104 **Let's be more up front**

You've possibly never looked at it this way before but, mostly, we treat our fellow humans with absolute contempt – for all the best reasons, naturally. We never like to hurt their feelings, because we want to be thought of as 'nice', so we continually lavish insincerities upon them.

(From 'Transition', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

105 **Oh, what a world!**

‘I was in the supermarket this morning, and there was an unusually long delay because of a problem at the checkout ... The thought came to me that, instead of getting irritated and impatient, which would achieve nothing, I might look around me attentively, or mindfully to use a term that’s currently doing the rounds. The store was very busy and I decided to focus on the many faces all around me.’ I paused for breath.

‘And what did you see?’

‘Nobody, but nobody, was smiling. Not one, that I could see, even had that kind of softness on their faces, which, though lacking a smile, would gently bear witness to a measure of peace and serenity. And not one of the checkout operators in my line of vision made eye contact with the customer, or greeted them, or said anything beyond the bare necessities of the transaction. Everybody wore a dejected and/or serious expression; many were frowning, and they all looked as if they were in a hurry. Honestly, I’m not exaggerating. To tell the truth, I was stunned. What kind of a world are we living in, Lucille, that everybody seems so burdened and careworn?’

‘I cannot help but think,’ she replied, ‘of the first three words in a popular psychology book: ‘Life is difficult.’* Obviously the people you observed were all experiencing that profound truism at the one time. One commiserates with you poor humans. Let me ask you a question: had anybody observed you at the same time, what would they have seen?’

I was a bit taken aback. I wished I had something positive to offer as a reply. ‘Er, well I was probably sporting a facial expression of perplexity and moroseness.’

Lucille laughed. ‘Just one of the crowd, then!’

(From ‘In With A Chance’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

* M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (1978).

106 **Something to think about – really think about**

God doesn’t limit us.
We limit God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

107 **Work is only work if ...**

How much are we, particularly in ‘Western civilisation’ and in those cultures which try to ape it, influenced by the so-called work ethic? That is, to what extent do we measure ourselves by what we work at? And to what extent do we define work as only those activities for which we are paid? It is now no longer politically correct or socially acceptable to say that a woman at home is ‘not working’, but the notion was universally held for generations.

Take an example. My garden, let us say, needs more work done to it than I have energy for. So I engage a contractor to do the bulk of the work and I will do the rest myself. A friend calls when the contractor’s van is parked out front and he is busy in the back garden. We stand looking out of the kitchen window and the friend says, ‘I see you have a man working in your back garden.’ The following week the same friend calls when I am in the back garden myself and he says, ‘I see you’re doing a bit of gardening!’

Or another: A professional artist produces ‘a fine piece of work’ while the best an amateur can manage, in most people’s perceptions, is ‘a nice painting!’

Another strong albeit less pervasively held belief is that if you thoroughly enjoy what you are doing, then it is not really work. Many still feel that we have to operate according to the so-called western work ethic, which emanates primarily from the Industrial Revolution, and perhaps also religious conditioning, and runs something like this: ‘Put your shoulder to the wheel, your nose to the grindstone, work you fingers to the bone; now enjoy yourself in that position if you dare!’ The ubiquitous Monday morning blues are a product of the fact that many people do not enjoy what they do. Such a pity.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

108 **It’s not my faith that counts, rather ...**

I am no longer in darkness
Because I have discovered *your* faithfulness ...

(From ‘And You Know’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

109 **Never take the book by the cover**

This was no ordinary fortune-teller, no mendicant gypsy at a country fair, no toothless hag sitting on an orange box at a street corner. She had consulting rooms in a fashionable quarter of town and a reputation to guard in her chosen profession which, as well as peering into the beyond, included several other therapies which enabled her to offer a more comprehensive service to her clients, as is the custom with many modern practitioners. All very respectable and awe-inspiring – the latter particularly so if those who applied to her for insight or solace were feeling vulnerable, as they usually were.

(From 'Beware The Ring Of Truth', story in *Oh, My Head!*)

110 **One piece of good counsel**

I was having a chat with my daughter recently and – I can't remember in what context – the question came up: if I were to leave only *one* piece of counsel to those who come after me, what would it be?

I reflected for a few moments, then said, 'Remain teachable. That way you will come to know everything you need to know that I cannot think of right now. Mostly, life will provide the lessons for you whether you like it or not, but where you have choice, select your teachers carefully.'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

111 **So much for philosophy**

An article in the morning paper had just reminded me that, at one stage in my varied career, I made a valiant attempt to study philosophy, but gave up in disillusionment after about ten lectures. My objective had been to emulate the world's greatest thinkers and become the soul of wisdom myself. I abandoned the idea, however, when I discovered that most of the world's greatest thinkers screwed themselves up with too much analysis.

(From 'Philosophy Hands On', story in *Life With Fred*)

112 **Time travel**

‘Now that I think of it, there is a part of me that is a child all the time. I become particularly aware of it when I look in the mirror and behold abundant lines and thinning grey hair and wonder how I came to be an adult with all these burdensome responsibilities ... I’m quite happy, mind you, about this ability to time travel in order to hobnob with the infant me; it keeps me young in spirit and open in mind ...’

(From ‘Just Kids’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

113 **God’s love and humility**

Since, as I have said elsewhere, love and humility are two sides of the same coin, and one cannot conceive of having one side of a coin without the other, it must follow that infinite love is complemented by infinite humility. The notion of the Creator of all that is being infinitely loving has been with us for aeons, but the idea of his being infinitely humble as well is mind-blowing.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

114 **A tale from childhood**

The woodland occupied less than four acres but was rich in its variety of trees and undergrowth, notably a veritable galaxy of bluebells, for it was the time of year for these beautiful, wild perennials. Gerald was delighted, and his memory instantly transported him to that wood of his childhood where his mother had brought him at every season of the year, as her parents had brought her. Each spring, she would stop with him and gaze long and wistfully at the new crop of bluebells, which reminded her of a lovely story her mother had told her.

She repeated it to Gerald each year: when their flowering season was over, legions of fairies would come and take each floral bell from the myriad stems, then they would ring the bell each day toward sunset until they found the love of their dreams. It was a fanciful story, but Gerald had always loved it.

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

115 **A place of peace**

Generally, when I am on a mountain, whether having climbed, driven up where there is a road or gone up by cable car, I drink in my surroundings, admire the view and savour the essence of the place. Eventually, however, while I might not actually say the words, comes a feeling which, if verbalised, would run something like this: *Well, it's beautiful up here, but now it's time to get down to the safety of the lower ground.*

There is one exception to this pattern: a place called Máméan, a shrine to St Patrick, on a mountain pass in the Maumturk Mountains of Connemara in Ireland, nestling between the Inagh and Maam valleys. I get a sense of peace in this spot that I can find nowhere else, and when I am up there I feel safe and often do not want to return to the relative unsafety of the lower ground.

I have lost count of the number of times I have made the climb at all times of the year – one hundred and fifty at least, maybe closer to two hundred. Small wonder that it has become the most sacred place on Earth to me. Others may go there and experience nothing, but I believe it is important for each of us to find our own sacred place, maybe more than one. It can be a mountain pass like mine, or simply a special corner of one's home, the rose garden in the local park, a church, a sea shore, a favoured coffee shop. All that matters is that we find a measure of safety and peace there.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

116 **Birthright?**

In the spiritual realm, I am not so much learning as remembering what I always knew. When I was conceived in the heart and mind of God, outside the limitations of time and space, I was given everything I needed to know but, with my entry into the human condition and the cumulative effects of education and conditioning, I forgot or mislaid much of that given knowledge.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

117 **Could we but learn from Nature**

When winter calls to calmness,
Each beast and plant and being
Ought respond in right reposing,
But we humans do not slumber,
Perpetually in motion
From the short day to the longest,
As if there were no seasons,
As if there were no reasons
For the change of light and shadow,
The departing of the swallow
And the advent of the stillness,
For the lessening of the brightness
And the calming cloak of dark ...

(From 'Winter's Wisdom', poem in *The Power Of Light*)

118 **When life could be more**

It was probably that time of her progress through the various phases of the human condition. The change of life some people call it. In fact she was pretty sure that's what was causing the problem. Some women have a pretty rough time of it. Others get off relatively lightly. She wasn't faring too badly herself as she had found a gifted healthcare practitioner who had guided her in the use of herbs and other natural remedies which had produced very good results. She had also been encouraged to consider meditation, yoga, holistic massage and a number of other wholesome endeavours but she hadn't tried those so far because of a reluctance that she found difficult to fathom. Be that as it may, and notwithstanding the good results from the herbs, she still experienced an unnamed feeling of discomfort, an intellectual insufficiency or a spiritual restiveness. She wasn't quite sure what label to assign to it, but it manifested in an uncomfortable, low grade anxiety – a sort of restless malaise – that was with her most of the time, together with a feeling that her life could be so much more.

(From 'Cheque Mate', story in *Oh, My Head!*)

119 **Comfort in misery?**

Despite this timely encouragement, and the optimistic exhortation to do the right thing, the dark clouds had failed to lift, and I was reluctant to emerge from the quagmire of misery; there is a certain perverse comfort in wallowing in self-pity, isn't there?

(From 'Atta Boy!', story in *Life With Lucille*)

120 **A fable about early influences**

The jackal lived on the great plains which adjoined the rain forest. His father had been an antoholic which, as most people know, is a termite disease, and he had to travel almost incessantly to feed his habit. To make matters worse his mother was a compulsive Rambler. For these reasons his parents were rarely at home and he had been raised by a nanny – a species of neurotic goat – who showed him and his sibling pups no affection and had been very neglectful in their upbringing.

(From 'Jackal And Hide', story in *Oh, My Head!*)

121 **Oh, for the simple life!**

As a young man, I dwelt in a cave, a humble cave on a homely mountainside, overlooking a picturesque valley. It was all I needed; really, all I needed. In summer it was cool and, in winter, with the assistance of a few bearskins, the contents of which provided valuable nourishment, it was as cosy as cosy could be. The valley provided berries, fruits and grains in ample abundance, seemingly automatically seasonally adjusted to my dietary requirements ... I passed my time doing a little of this, a small bit of that and just a touch of the other – activities which have since, I understand, acquired the generic title of 'pottering'. But the consummate happiness was that I never had to think or worry about anything. There I was, me, just being, totally fulfilled, owning almost nothing, but possessing everything I needed. Everything.

(From 'Progress', story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

122 **The spirituality of Love**

When our hearts begin to discern, even a little, the overwhelming greatness of God's love and faithfulness, and his power to change our lives, we will want to celebrate the Love Of Our Lives spontaneously rather than solely in ritualised conformity, and, regardless of the apparent chaos in the world around us and in our own lives, we will *know*, in a way that defies finite explanation, that all will be well with us here and hereafter. From this wellspring of hope and freedom, service of others will flow naturally as a response to infinite, steadfast, unconditional love, rather than out of an imposed and burdensome sense of duty.

(From 'Choose A Fabric', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

123 **Simple remedy for stress and the like**

It's been a while since I wrote a poem;
No wonder I'm feeling grotty.
See, I have to write 'em regular like
To keep me from going potty.
 Some folks go for pills and quacks
 To manage their humanity,
 But I've to write what's in my head
 To guarantee my sanity.
So, I'd like to pen a line or two
The current crux to lick,
And, though it wants for flair and style,
This verse should do the trick.
 There, you see, it's worked already;
 I no longer feel neurotic.
 Oh, what a simple remedy
 To ward off the psychotic!
So, when you're next in disarray,
Assemble what you think,
Then versify what's on your mind.
It's cheaper than a shrink.

(‘Remedy’, poem in *Oh, My Head!*)

124 **Cynicism**

The thought occurs that cynicism could more aptly be called ‘cynicitis’ because it is a disease – an insidious disease that eats away at people’s souls, robs them of spontaneity, childlike awe, joy and innocence, and causes them to see hidden agendas – mostly sinister – often where there are none, or at least relatively harmless ones.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

125 **It’s all about trust**

That’s funny. I must have taken a wrong turning. I thought I was headed for green pastures, luxuriant forests and mountain streams, but I ended up in the goddam desert. It’s hot here, very hot; arid too; and lonely. Pretty dismal state of affairs for a sensitive soul like me; and the longer I’m here, blundering on footstep after footstep, the weaker I’m getting ...

I don’t know how I got into this situation or why I’m here. I don’t know where I’m going or if I’ll ever get there. I don’t know what will become of me if I do; I don’t know what will become of me if I don’t. Come to think of it there is not much that I do know. *Sigh!* It’s all about trust. I suppose.

(From ‘It’s All About Trust’, story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

126 **The limitations of intellect**

‘I should have known!’ said David somewhat ruefully. ‘You must have a very high IQ.’

‘There you are mistaken. It has nothing to do with IQ, which is anyway a regrettably inappropriate measure of a person’s true worth. One of the greatest burdens we carry is the insatiable appetite of the finite human mind, seeking intellectual explanations for things that are countless light years beyond the capacity of even the most highly developed intellect. Those who believe that solely by the power of human intelligence will we attain desirable outcomes in the world are blind to history and live in an impoverished illusion.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

127 **Things I've given up on – 1**

'Fred, I've been having a look at some of this so-called new age stuff recently. I could be disposed to like certain aspects of it, challenging and refreshing one might call it, but a goodly proportion of it is bizarre if not suspect, to my way of thinking at any rate. I don't think I'll bother with it any more. I mean to say, Fred, I need that sort of thing like a porpoise needs a snorkel.'

(From 'A Lesson In Logic', story in *Life With Fred*)

128 **Things I've given up on – 2**

'And that's not the end of it; I've just given up on all those books on popular psychology that I've been reading. Full of sterling stuff, no doubt about that, but in one way or another many of them inform you, or imply, that parents have inflicted permanent damage to their children's personalities by the time they're three months old, so that every time I tick off one of the kids, even with the greatest justification, I go on a colossal guilt trip. I mean to say, Fred, I need that sort of thing like an earthworm needs a helicopter.'

(From 'A Lesson In Logic', story in *Life With Fred*)

129 **Things I've given up on – 3**

'And, for years, I've been perusing those scriptures assiduously. Wonderful stuff, of course, marvellously inspiring and so on, nothing to equal it anywhere, as I believe I have had reason to bring to your attention on another occasion, but it is capable of so many interpretations and a lot of it is downright confusing, even depressing – quite the contrary to what scripture is supposed to be, or so I thought. Obviously I was wrong. I think I'll give it a miss from now on. I mean to say, Fred, I need that sort of thing like a rhinoceros needs nail varnish.'

(From 'A Lesson In Logic', story in *Life With Fred*)

130 **Things I've given up on – 4**

‘And then there’s that learned friend of ours. Wisdom and common sense virtually dripping off every one of his fingertips; yet only the other day he came up with a philosophy that was definitely for the birds, or *pour les oiseaux* as our French brethren might put it. No, on second thoughts, perhaps they mightn’t. Anyway, what I’m getting at is that this normally reliable sage spouted a load of unmitigated cobblers recently. So that’s the end of him as far as I’m concerned. I mean to say, Fred, I need that sort of thing like a jackass needs a Jacuzzi.’

(From ‘A Lesson In Logic’, story in *Life With Fred*)

131 **Things I've given up on – 5**

‘But the hardest burden to bear, old thing, and I have no doubt that I can count on your sympathy, is that even I – normally erudite, perceptive and sagacious in every possible way – am also capable, at times, of talking unadulterated bullshit. It’s most distressing, Fred. What it indicates is that I now no longer dare to listen even to my own inner promptings in case they’re screwed up, erroneous, false, misleading, or all four. I mean to say, Fred, I need that sort of thing like a warthog needs a facelift. Come to think of it, a warthog might benefit substantially from a facelift, but you get my drift!’

(From ‘A Lesson In Logic’, story in *Life With Fred*)

132 **Attitudes**

Whenever I felt uncomfortable in my skin, I used to look to left and to right, before and aft, to see who or what was causing it. And I always found out who or what was causing it, but it never made any difference. Now, when I feel uncomfortable in my skin, I look at my attitudes, and it always makes a difference – for the better.

(From Part 8 of *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*,
3rd edn)

133 **Just the first lines of a favourite poem ...**

There,
On the eve of Easter,
At the back of the garden,
Bordered by the pine trees and hedges,
Blossoming in a neglected corner
(Witness to wintertime and a reluctant gardener)
Was a single, lonely bluebell,
Like its beholder, an only child ...

(From 'The Bluebell', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

134 **Beyond limits**

I am absolutely astonished at how my religious education, social conditioning and any number of other influences limited my view of what God could or would 'do' or 'allow'. Since he has taken that constricting halter from around my neck, I have – even in the midst of the pain of the human condition – come into a profound experience, therefore knowledge, of a realm of stupendous wonder beyond dreaming. That is why I ask each morning, and several times during the day, 'Let me not limit you in any way today.' Mind you, a little bit of the old harness still clings to me for the moment; a lifetime of conditioning doesn't disappear overnight. What will it be like when it is all gone?!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

135 **Down to basics**

'... You quite distinctly said that there is *nothing* we have to do.'

'You're wrong,' returned Fred, unruffled. 'What I said was, "There is nothing we *have* to do." There are always things it might be advisable to do, requests of us and demands on us to which it would be wise to accede, obligations to the brotherhood of man and so on, but I still stand by my assertion: there is nothing we *have* to do – well, except one, of course!'

(From 'It's All In The Emphasis', story in *Life With Fred*)

136 **Yearning and pining**

Yearning enlivens and keeps hope alive, whereas pining deadens, and eats away at hope. It is well for me, when I identify an intense inner desire, to determine whether it is a yearning or a pining ... One thing I notice is that the deepest yearnings are mostly beyond words, whereas I can usually express the pinings relatively simply.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

137 **Miracles? Yes, definitely**

‘Dad, do you believe in miracles?’

‘My dear daughter, it’s time I shared a most important part of my life with you. Ever since very early childhood, I had the most profound, sometimes painful, yearning for something that, as my intellect started to mature, I became certain, beyond any doubt, was utterly impossible – even to God. And yearning has to be by far and away the most intense form of asking because it is there whether one wishes it to be or not. Other requests come and go, but a yearning is virtually a part of who one is – a continuous, wordless request; and, in this case, one that never left me, but one that pleaded for something which could never, ever be. And I often grieved. Then, out of the blue, when I was fifty years of age, My God – beyond the dreams of a thousand lifetimes – fulfilled my lifelong yearning and gave me my heart’s desire, and it has never left me since that moment. Yes, Alison, I believe in miracles. More than that, I rely on them. Now let me tell you the full story ...’

(From ‘The Dance Goes On’, draft sequel to the novel
Black On Magenta)

138 **Appearances deceive**

Macho Man tries to make the world his,
But, under the surface, how fragile he is.

(From ‘Handle With Care’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

139 **Spiritual laws**

I heard one well-known speaker say, on a video:

The scripture says that we have access into the grace of God by faith ... That is a spiritual law and you cannot change it ... There are spiritual laws that he (God) has set in motion about how he deals with us. A primary law is the law of faith.

This teaching is widespread and, sadly, portrays God as an arbitrary, *conditional* God, i.e. you will receive his grace, favour, healing, etc. *if* you have faith. In my experience, the same people that give this teaching will insist that God is a God of *unconditional* love.

There is only one spiritual law and that is the law of love (see Matt. 22: 34–40). But love is no law at all; it is a spontaneous outpouring from the heart and, with God, a ‘continuously spontaneous’ outpouring from the heart.

Love creates its own response: if I love I will instinctively want to honour, respect and cherish the loved one. If I do not love then I am unlikely to want to obey any laws unless I am conditioned or coerced.

Put another way – which paradoxically does not contradict the assertion that love is not a law – love is a law unto itself, or expressed still better in the words of Erich Fromm,* *Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* 1900–1980. German-born psychoanalyst and social philosopher.

140 **Intuition and the purpose of life**

An intuitive man does not feel very comfortable in a rationalist world. I need somehow to learn to harmonise the rational and the spiritual as best I can. This may be one of the objectives of my journey in this life, although it could be that the two are incompatible ... The ultimate objective of human existence, of course, is to experience one’s oneness with God. At least, that is the ultimate objective of my existence.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

141 **God is pure experience**

In late 2002, I was talking to somebody about matters spiritual and I forget his precise question, but it was along the lines of, ‘What is God?’ to which I responded spontaneously and with enthusiasm, ‘God is pure experience.’ He looked at me in a funny sort of a way and didn’t say anything, but I am pretty certain, based on his later reactions in our conversations, that he was thinking, ‘Poor misguided sap!’ or words to that effect. I made no further comment because I was not there to teach him anything, but what I felt like saying was: ‘Is your relationship with your wife a set of principles, theories, rules and guidelines to which you adhere, or do you *experience* your relationship with her? Do you get up in the morning and consult the guide book on the principle of kindness in matrimony, or do you spontaneously bring her a cup of tea just because you love her?’ I know what his answer would have been ...

I remember reading this little anecdote many years ago. It has become much more significant in the light of my experience. A teacher asked a seven-year-old, ‘What do you think of God?’ The child thought for a moment and answered, ‘God isn’t a think; he’s a feel!’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

142 **Past and future**

To have no time for the past is to have no time for the precious jewels that are always embedded in it, is to place no value on the treasures that are always uniquely ours unless we choose to deny or ignore them. Likewise, to disregard the future totally is to walk blindly into quicksand.

(From ‘How Now?’, essay in *In My Write Mind*)

143 **The better course**

Except where an issue is critical, it is almost always better for our own equilibrium to excuse rather than accuse.

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

144 ***Living With The Blues* – sharing is caring**

I chose the title of this little book carefully. I can only learn these things for myself, not for anybody else. I did not want to suggest that I had found the answer and raise your expectations.

What you will find here is a selection of things that continue to help me on a day-to-day basis. I have found that healing is a process which takes time, and the process is never perfect, but I have found it possible to make my life a good deal more manageable. Each one of us is on a different path, but it is my earnest hope that we have sufficient in common to enable at least some of these ideas [over thirty of them in *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection*] to help you to continue along yours with a little more peace of mind ...

Like all exercises, these ideas need practice. If I need to get physically fit, go for one workout to the gym, feel stiff and sore the following morning, and say 'Well that didn't work, did it?' I'd be lacking in common sense. I have to keep going, of course, until my body adapts and becomes fit. It's the same with the emotions and the spirit (if you do not like the word 'spirit' use 'life force' or whatever term you feel comfortable with).

(From *Living With The Blues*)

145 **Conditioning**

When I was an infant, a mystic voice said:
'You'd better get it all right, or you're dead!
Your actions may ne'er be with failure endowed,
Perfection – with balance – is all that's allowed.'
So, I got it all right, and I ne'er got it wrong;
'Perfection With Balance' was my battle song
As I warred on my faults and made virtue my goal,
And brought all of my appetites under control.
Yes, I humbly submitted to early hypnosis;
Now I find that I've screwed myself up in the process.

(*'Sting In The Tail'*, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

146 **When in doubt**

‘Knowing what I now know, how is it that I ever doubt at all these days?’

‘Doubt is as much a part of life on Earth as the changing of the seasons; but the time must come in the course of our evolution when we learn to deal with doubt rather as we might treat an insignificant head cold. Just take a simple remedy, then let it run its course.’

‘A simple remedy? Meaning what, in this instance?’

‘Surrendering to higher wisdom, David. When you do this, no matter how troublesome the doubt, the trusting will be done for you until your situation returns to normal.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

147 **Lucille always knows**

‘Nine down and one to go; that will make a total of ten. I’ve always been rather good at arithmetic, you know.’

‘Pardon?’ said Lucille.

‘Ah! I see I was being a trifle cryptic, old thing. I was referring to the fact that, since my recent emergence from the wasteland of a prolonged writer’s block, we have written nine accounts of our chats. I thought it would be rather jolly if we could make it ten – nice round number – as a sort of celebration of my renaissance.’

‘Oh, I see. Yes. Good idea. What do you want to chat about?’

‘That’s the problem Lucille. I haven’t the foggiest idea. So, story number ten is just a pipe dream for the moment. My mind is a complete blank.’

‘There are times when I get an uneasy feeling that my faithful Muse knows me better than I know myself. This was one of those times.’

‘No, it’s not,’ she said. ‘You know well it’s not. Most commendably, you are trying to keep things light and bright, wearing the mask for my sake as it were, but your heart is heavy ...’

(From ‘Mona Lisa Smile’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

148 **Lucille not up to par?**

‘Nice day,’ she said, trying to change the subject, I suppose. Not one of her best efforts in that regard.

‘Yes,’ I agreed, ‘very nice.’

‘But see that enormous bank of dark cloud looming up from the west?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, the weather forecast was right. Within five minutes, it’s going to start pouring out of the heavens, and it seems that it’s going to stay that way for the rest of the day, so you had better abandon your plans for a trip to Connemara.’

If this was her way of cheering me up, it left a lot to be desired. Pretty rotten as a matter of fact. Not up to her usual standard.

(From ‘Mona Lisa Smile’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

149 **Trouble brewing within ...**

I gave it to him straight: ‘There is a strong possibility – bordering on absolute certainty, loath though I am to even contemplate it – that I, er ... you, that is to say we, have a badly split personality, to such an inordinate degree in fact that, frequently, the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing, if I might make so bold as to borrow a biblical metaphor. And while I’m on the subject of biblical metaphors, the same respected tome, unless I am very much mistaken, warns of the perils of a house being divided against itself.’

(From ‘Divided We Stand’, story in *Life With Fred*)

150 **A little harmless fantasy**

It was a topping day, I had just climbed considerably further up my favourite mountain than usual, and the rarefied air was making me feel distinctly light-headed. Indeed I felt as if it would not take too much for me to sprout wings and fly hither and thither to my heart’s content. Fantasy of course, but there’s no harm in a little innocent fantasy, is there?

(From ‘Fascinating!’, story in *Life With Fred*)

151 **First fruits**

A new morn has dawned
And I rise from the bed
The prospect of breakfast
Alone in my head.
The day takes its toll,
And I must get enough
Multifarious intakes
Of nourishing stuff;
So, pass the bread
And pass the jam,
Pass the butter,
Pass the ham;
Pass the milk,
And if you please,
Pass the corn flakes
And the cheese.
Oh! Sorry dear,
I near forgot:
The warming brew
Is in the pot;
So be indulgent,
Hear my plea:
Put down the *Times*,
And pass the tea.
But, first things first,
And guaranteed,
I have to tell
My foremost need –
That if you're able,
Heavens above,
Across the table,
Pass me ...
Love.

(‘Breakfast’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

152 **When the desire to chat is unrequited**

The day's labours accomplished, I found myself decidedly in the mood for a cosy natter – the comfortable sort, you know, that takes place between like-minded souls. I waded, therefore, in at the deep end. 'Did you ever wonder, Fred, what it would be like to be sauntering through the park on a blissfully balmy spring evening, the birdies chirping, tweeting, warbling and winging hither and thither, one's soul in tune with Nature, and thinking benevolent thoughts of all one's fellow creatures? And have you ever wondered what it would be like, while on such a ramble, for one to be sporting the very best designer attire, matching silk tie and handkerchief, expensive Parisian aftershave, shoes polished to a mirror-like shine, swinging the carefully folded umbrella in a jaunty, dapper, carefree fashion, the spirit several leagues distant, contemplating, with passionate expectancy, the forthcoming and long-awaited assignation with the ladylove of one's life?'

'No,' said Fred, 'I never did wonder all that; nor am I wondering it now.'

'Oh,' I returned, abashed, disappointed that my scintillating efforts, the product of a brilliant and inventive imagination, to make light and bright chit-chat with my resident – and normally loquacious – sidekick had gone off like a damp squib. 'That's the end of that conversation, then.'

'Yup!' confirmed Fred.

(‘One-sided’, story in *Life With Fred*)

153 **My nature**

I noticed recently that when I identified some undesirable trait in my character that seemed virtually unshiftable, I found myself saying, for example, 'It's my nature to keep struggling.' Not so. It's my *pattern* to keep struggling. My nature is pure and unsullied, founded in My Beautiful One. My nature is to let go and let God. The trouble is that my nature often gets buried under a heap of patterns. Even then, I do my level best to let go.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

154 **Femininity**

A perusal of the dictionary for the meaning of ‘feminine’ is an unsatisfactory exercise because it gives the usual lexical interpretations: ‘female; characteristic of, peculiar or appropriate to, women or the female sex; womanish’ (*The Chambers Dictionary*). One has to go to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* to get a marginally more satisfactory addition to this list, namely ‘womanly’. One fares somewhat better with *Roget’s Thesaurus* which suggests, among others, ‘ladylike, gentlewomanlike’.

However, in order that it become clear that, in writing this essay, I am motivated by a profound love, respect and esteem for femininity as conceived by God, I needed something less lexical and based more on my personal understanding of this unique and precious quality. I remembered that I had written a light-hearted story on this topic, but based on sincere sentiments. Here is an appropriate extract:

‘Feminine’ is one of the most beautiful words in the language. It suggests sugar and spice and all things nice – everything that men are generally not, in other words.

(From ‘Femininity, Modesty And More’, essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

155 **Intelligent versus intellectual**

When thinking about a topic, I sometimes use a dictionary definition to help me along. More often, though, I prefer to rely on my intuition, or my gut feeling if you prefer, to elucidate what I mean. This is such an occasion.

I am intelligent, but I am definitely not intellectual. Most of what flows through me comes from the heart and spirit, and I use the intelligence to provide me with the gift of articulation to give the resulting perceptions and reflections form and shape in language. If I were intellectual, I would live mostly out of my head. I don’t.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

156 **Actions speak louder than words. Or do they?**

Many years ago, I was staying with some dear friends, who had been married for some time. I was sitting in a room adjacent to the kitchen, and the connecting door was slightly open, so that I could not help but hear their conversation. She asked, 'Do you love me?' He responded, 'You know I do,' and continued with a litany of all the nice things he had bought for her, all the things he did around the house, the shopping, the gardening and more items of that kind. Then there was a short silence, after which she said she was not ungrateful for all he did, but concluded, 'But I need you to *tell* me that you love me sometimes.'

I know a good number of people who were in high profile jobs with excellent 'conditions', but who nevertheless left to go elsewhere, sometimes on a lower salary. Why? Because the companies they left adopted the (mostly unspoken) attitude: 'We're paying you well; now get on with it.' In order to stay put, all that these employees wanted, now and again, was for their bosses to say: 'We really appreciate what you do here, and we're glad to have you on board.' More, mind you, than just a few crumbs from the rich man's table, so to speak; to have any value, the words have to be a reflection of a positive and nurturing corporate ethos. How many organisations lose really valuable people for want of a *sincere* sentence or two at the right moment?

Who has never had a falling out with another, from a minor tiff to a serious conflict, and known the distress that can cause? And when one side is able to summon up that beautiful quality, humility, and express sincere regret and a desire to make amends, small arguments and even major generational rifts can be healed.

Children need to be taught self-discipline, adequate boundaries, care for others, a healthy work ethic and so forth. But, in my perception, while these values are critical, the children who truly thrive are the ones who are told often that they are loved (for who they are, not for what they do), and receive heartfelt, appropriate and timely words of praise and encouragement.*

There are so many occasions in my life that I have been in company, or at a meeting, and somebody said something that lit a light bulb in my head and started a useful or nurturing train of thought that I would not have come up with by myself. More than that, I could not count the number of times that I have read words in various sources – from a church pamphlet to a philosophical treatise, from a self-help book to a page on a website, even ideas from comical verse or prose, or even song lyrics – that have really helped me. My writings are punctuated with quotations which have become my companions on my journey through life.

The word of advice, the word of support, the word of direction, the word of caution, the word of wisdom, the word of compassion, the word of apology, most of all the word of love – all can be such immeasurable treasures.

Do actions speak louder than words? Sometimes, but not always, not by any means.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* As a parent of four wonderful adult children, I sometimes ask myself, with some concern, whether I could have done a much better job in this regard. But I must remind myself that there is no such thing as the perfect parent, that a guilt trip now will do neither them nor me any good, and acknowledge that I did *my* best with whatever insights I had at the time. (See piece 394, ‘Bringing up children’, on page 194.)

157 **Priorities**

I spent twenty-seven years as a lecturer, of which eight years were as head of a department, in ‘Acamania’ as you call it, so I know what you are talking about! I loved the work, but over the years I learned what was important in my life and what was not. I found that so many of the values we pursue give fleeting satisfaction, but little permanent fulfilment. What I need, as far as I can, is to keep my life as simple and uncluttered as possible. In the world in which we live, that is becoming increasingly difficult.

(From a letter, October 2015)

158 **Friendship therapy**

I need to share my innermost feelings and secrets with someone I trust, a treasured friend, on a regular basis.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

159 **Talking to Lucille about an important topic**

‘Lucille, I don’t know where, but I am pretty sure it’s recorded in one of our chats that you and your fellow deities don’t consider yourselves the be-all and end-all, but recognise, and take your path in life from, the one true God that I know. Is my memory serving me correctly?’

‘Yes, it most certainly is. This is a fact about us that is little known. But why do you ask?’

‘I don’t know whether you’ve been tuned into my inner deliberations for the past while, but I have always been unclear, even confused, about the meaning of prayer, meditation and contemplation as they apply to my life. I mean, prayer, as commonly understood, is a petition to God. But surely, in a love relationship, one doesn’t keep asking for things. Another common definition is “the raising of the heart and mind to God”. Like, he’s up there and I’m down here, and prayer’s got to bridge the gap? No, no, no! That separation doesn’t exist. For goodness’ sake, Lucille! The purpose of human life is, after all, to experience one’s oneness with God. Unity, not separation. Then there’s this exasperating question of meditation. Try though I might, I have never been able to meditate in what I perceive to be the traditional mould. You know: a particular posture, suitable mantra, stilling the mind, and so forth, although I greatly respect and admire those for whom that way works. I have my own way, but those of an orthodox disposition would doubtless consider it idiosyncratic, to say the least. As for contemplation, I have always thought it was another word for meditation, although, since both words are in common use, I suspect there might be a difference. Anyway, what do you make of all that, old thing?’

(From ‘Amen To That’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

160 **The desire to be in control**

One of the most distressing – indeed frightening – sensations in life is the feeling that we are not in control. ‘I must be in control of my life’ is a belief so pervasively held throughout the world that few ever seem to question it. Perhaps, even as you begin to read this essay, you will almost immediately find yourself thinking, ‘What the hell is he on about? Everybody knows that, in so far as is humanly possible, it is vital to be in control of one’s life. If I am not in control of my life, then I’ll be subject to the whims of every thing and every one and eventually become like the hole in the doughnut!’

(From ‘The Cult Of Control’, essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

161 **Back to the future**

I was talking to a friend recently who is actively involved, with others, in his parish. They had been engaging in methods to increase church attendance, such as having guest speakers and – to use his own words – ‘using a bit of marketing’.

I sat with my lips tight shut until he eventually asked for my opinion. Having asked him if he really wanted to hear it, I said that, instead of looking for new ways to attract adherents to the impoverished existing doctrines and rituals, I believe that the entire people of God should get down on its knees and entreat him to restore the pearl of great price that we possessed at the outset but have lost en route. Sadly, I don’t think my friend knew what I was talking about.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

162 **Keeping out of the way**

A little prayer I often say is: ‘Let nothing or no one – especially me – get in the way of your plan for my life.’ It helps to keep me focused, even if imperfectly, on his way rather than mine. Equally, I will often say the same prayer for others.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

163 **Addicted to something? Call for Jasmine!**

‘You poor thing! Are you all right?’

I literally staggered across the floor from the loo and plonked myself down in the chair opposite Jasmine. I had just thrown up – in the most spectacular fashion – a large coffee and three doughnuts.

‘I feel terrible.’

‘Yes, you do look a bit green. Maybe a fresh coffee and another doughnut would settle your ...?’

I don’t think I have ever moved so fast in my life. I made the gents just in time for the repeat performance. When I got back, Jasmine was looking at me with what I can only describe as an inscrutable expression on her face.

‘Dear, dear, it must have been the I-won’t-mention-the-name that upset you. I wonder why?’

The second round had at least cleared out my innards, I was beginning to feel a little steadier, and my head cleared sufficiently to let me think straight. I looked at the overly innocent look on the little fairy’s face, and the penny dropped.

‘Jasmine, by any chance did you have anything to do with that?’

‘Guilty!’ she replied, bowing her head.

‘Are you trying to do me in or something?’

‘Short memory, that’s the problem.’

‘Huh?’

‘You asked me to help you with your sugar addiction, if I remember rightly.’

(From ‘Mission Improbable’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

164 **No monopoly**

God is too infinitely great to be monopolised or defined by any one religion. Each religion is but one of the countless paths to him, and he honours whatever path we choose, perhaps with the exception of those which are born of human perversity. However, I must be very careful in making any judgements in this regard.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

165 **Love demands nothing**

The Love that we long for
Needs no explanation,
No indoctrination,
No justification.
True Love never leads
To debate and to reason,
Wants no special season,
Is always returning
To the innermost yearning
To love and be loved
With no hidden agenda,
No self-centred motive –
For love has no needs,
Demands no apt deeds,
Takes up no positions,
Creates no conditions,
Neither doubts nor believes,
Never judges or grieves;
Love just gives and receives.

(‘Love Has No Needs’, poem in *From The Cradle Of Eternity*)

166 **Love of Thérèse of Lisieux**

On 14th June 2001, I was walking into my home town of Galway and passed the cathedral. There were thousands of people in and around it. I asked what was going on and was told that the relics of Thérèse of Lisieux were resting in the cathedral during their Irish tour, and had attracted this enormous gathering of people. At that time, I knew nothing of the saint beyond the facts that she was known as ‘The Little Flower’ and had died very young.

I thought to myself, ‘Since I am here, I might as well go in.’ I queued for a while and eventually passed the reliquary, said a prayer, moved quickly on and gave it no more thought. Unknown to me at the time, I had, in that moment, come to love Thérèse greatly.

(From the Introduction to *Till The Last Day Of Forever*)

167 **What is success?**

I have never, I mean *never* heard anybody say something like this: ‘Mary did well at school and got her degree, but after a few years in the rough and tumble of the world of commerce, she bought a little cottage in the country, found some stress-free, part-time work in the nearby village to help pay the bills, and did much volunteer work to meet needs in the local community. She often walked in the countryside and went to the nearby mountains, bringing a simple picnic with her, and in the evenings enjoyed reading, writing, listening to music or conversation with friends. And she loved to tend her little garden. Simple tastes. Above all, she developed a beautiful spirituality which nurtured her day to day and gave her that most precious of qualities – peace of mind. As can be seen, Mary was hugely successful.’

Why have I never heard anything like that? Because ‘success’ is almost invariably equated with career advancement, financial gain, material possessions, status, power, winning at various competitive endeavours,* sexual gratification and other transitory aspirations. And the vast majority of us have been drawn by these magnets in one way or another. I’m not being elitist or superior here; for a good portion of my life, I sought some of these goals too, and still can, but much less frequently, since they do not fulfil ...

It goes without saying that most of us are not in a position to do as Mary did, but it is the underlying philosophy of life that I am emphasising with this illustration, not the particular circumstances.

(From ‘Success And Failure’, essay in
Reality And Illusion & Other Essays)

* This point is further developed in the essay ‘Are We Meant To Be Competitive?’ in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn.

168 **Which view of spirituality?**

The maze – or be amazed?

The key question of life’s journey.

(From ‘It All Depends’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

169 **One grows attached to pets**

‘... at one point I would gladly have parted with a princely sum to anybody who was prepared to kidnap the canine quadruped, and give him a good home, preferably light years away from mine. Yet, several moons later, and notwithstanding a period of denial on my part, I have become quite attached to the little fellow and he to me.’

(From ‘Familiarity Breeds ...’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

170 **Serves me right for eavesdropping**

‘Shush, Fred; I know it’s eavesdropping, and that is neither polite nor ethical, but I’m trying to overhear the conversation of the two blokes at the next table.’

‘Oh! What are they talking about?’

‘I said “Shush”.’

‘I’ll shush when you tell me what they’re talking about.’

‘Damn you, Fred. But if it’ll shut you up: they’re talking about what they most look for in a woman.’

‘A very interesting topic, one never far from the mind of the male of the species, a subject fraught, of course, with diverse opinions, and a theme eternally current, always in vogue, for each generation has its particular views, and each individual his individual taste. And a jolly good thing too, that’s what I say. Variety is the spice of life.’

‘For goodness’ sake shut up, Fred! Tsk! There’s no point now, they’re leaving. You’re an inconsiderate pest and an intermittent blight, Fred. With all your bloody talk, you’ve spoiled my fun.’

(From ‘Figure of Speech’, story in *Life With Fred*)

171 **When does eternity start?**

My eternity started when I was conceived in the mind of God, outside the realms of time and space; it will not commence at my death. My life, therefore, is a continuum along which, at certain key points, there are important gateways or transitions.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

172 **Beyond belief**

In his bestselling allegorical novel *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho has the alchemist say at one point: *When you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom are you believed.*

In this one pronouncement, he certainly said a mouthful as it relates to my personal experience, and if I told anybody why, they wouldn't believe me!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

173 **Progression or regression?**

I have often heard people say, when justifying a particular material development, particularly a controversial one, 'You can't stand in the way of progress.' And how often have I heard people say, of the way in which our world is evolving, 'That's progress.'

With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that, in almost all these cases, the word 'progress' was used as a substitute for 'economic growth'.

It doesn't take a social scientist to tell us that economic growth may well bring a better standard of living (a measure of material welfare), but does not necessarily guarantee a better quality of life (a measure of contentment, of peace of mind). Indeed, it would seem that unbridled economic growth causes serious problems – social, ecological, and even economic.

The word progress means to step/walk/go forward. This raises the question, 'Forward? Toward what?' In other words there must be an end objective to the progress. Is there? Or is 'progress' as we have used it here simply an impoverished euphemism for, profit-hungry, power-grabbing domination of the many by the few? Most of the evidence around us would seem to point to this being the case. This is myopic in the extreme, since the long-term welfare of the planet and its inhabitants is always relegated to second place when commercial or military (the two would often seem to be inextricably linked) interests are at stake. Too few, it would seem, are concerned with establishing the fundamental reason

for our existence and then directing the world's activities toward its achievement.

So, what is the fundamental reason for our existence? For me, the answer begins in this quotation from a devotee of the Hindu mystic, Amma:

The goal of human existence is to experience one's oneness with God. That's happiness, that's peace, that's contentment.

Well, if it begins there, what's the next step? Now there you have me! I mean, can you imagine addressing the board members of a large, profitable, multinational corporation and suggesting to them that they alter their mission statement to read, "The mission of this corporation is to help the people of the world to experience their oneness with God"? And picture the faces of a country's military leaders if you were to suggest the same thing to them!

This dilemma is not new. We've been getting it wrong ever since Eve talked Adam into eating the apple. The best thing I can do is just *blossom where I am planted*, rather than try to change the world. That said, it is difficult to stand by and perceive that world to be regressing rather than progressing.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

174 **Great therapy – and putting my foot in it**

'What are you doing hugging my tree?'

I blushed bright scarlet. Hugging trees is very good for you, but it is not generally viewed as a sign of a sound mind. I had assumed I was alone in the little woodland glade, and could hug the tree to my heart's content without anyone seeing me. I looked around but saw nobody. I must have imagined it. Bit worrying if I'm hearing voices that aren't there!

'Here I am, up here.' And she was – on a branch about twenty feet up: a very pretty little fairy.

I gasped. 'But fairies don't exist.'

'Please do not add insult to injury,' she said. 'First you hug my tree without my permission; now you tell me that I do not exist.' A tear stole down her cheek.

(From 'Whose Tree?', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

175 **A fairy tale romance**

But there was sufficient light for them to gaze deeply once again into each other's eyes as they rowed back from the island. He had never seen this woman before, nor had she ever seen him. He did not even know her name, and up to now she had been the only one to speak. And she could not possibly know who he was – just a passer-by, a trespasser indeed, whom she had mistaken for a boatman. They were still gazing intently at each other as the prow of the boat grazed gently onto the slipway. Neither made any attempt to move, nor did they remove their eyes from each other. At length, the young woman reached slowly forward and took his hands in hers.

‘Gerald!’ she said tenderly.

‘Elizabeth!’ he replied with equal tenderness.

They continued to look deep into each other's eyes as if enchanted. All that could be heard was the rustle of the rushes caressed by a gentle breeze, the lake water lapping against the stern of the boat and the haunting call of the curlew on the lake. In this softest of semi-silences, Nature wordlessly witnessed the wondrous truth: they were hopelessly, irrevocably, eternally in love.

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

176 **Unity of prayer, meditation and contemplation**

In almost all of what I have read on the subject, even in texts that are very meaningful to me, prayer, meditation and contemplation are treated as separate and discrete aspects of our spirituality, to which specific time and effort is allocated.

For many years now I have not been at all comfortable with this view simply because I do not experience these things in that way. Although I have been somewhat aware of the explanation, only recently has it become fully clear to me: prayer, meditation and contemplation are not separate facets of my life but integral to it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

177 **The River Nymph – metaphor for Connemara**

The moment when my soul ascends:
I meet you where the river bends,
At where the water winds and wends
From humble source to final sea;
And no one sees your form save me;
For you're the lovely River Nymph,
E'er-present though elusive,
Come newly from the mountain
Still swathed in dreamlike mist,
To bathe in early morning,
Just after blessed dawning
Of the fresh, still infant day,
And to keep a sacred tryst
With one your lips have kissed
Many a time before.
The substance of lore
And the fairy of fantasy,
But as real to me as the rocks I see,
The trees beside me growing,
The river before me flowing,
As the heather on the heath
And the ancient bog beneath.
You choose to whom you manifest,
Of those who come in Nature's quest,
You choose the one that you love best.
Oh, precious few are those you favour,
And fewer still your beauty savour.
That's why no other soul can see
The River Nymph, enchanting, free,
Because the River Nymph loves me.

(‘The River Nymph’, poem in *Landscape And Lyric*)

178 **How am I?**

‘Pray tell me, do,’ she said.

‘What shall I tell?’ I said.

‘Just how are you?’ she said.

‘Oh, I’m okay, I suppose.

Er... well, you know,’ I said,

‘The baffling blend,

The mystifying mix,

Of miracle and misery,

Of mountain stream

And desert sand,

Of forest glade

And storm-washed strand.’

(From ‘The Penny Drops’, poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

179 **On reflection**

Do you ever get into one of those reflective, thoughtful, contemplative states of mind? I’m not sure exactly what you’d call it, but sort of pondering on the meaning of life and one’s purpose in the cosmic scheme of things. I know that all sounds terribly existential, but I do and, on the occasion of which I speak, I was. Pondering, I mean. In the course of my deliberations on this weighty topic, I had come up against a bit of a stone wall, or an impasse if you prefer, so I decided to consult my resident thesaurus, which was as good a way as any of involving him in the internal debate.

‘Fred,’ I said, ‘perhaps you might bring the power of your not inconsiderable part of our intellect to bear on a subject that is causing me some bother, namely what is the difference between peace and serenity?’

(From ‘Conversation Stopper’, story in *Life With Fred*)

180 **Beating around the bush**

‘I say ... um ...’

‘Do you wish to confer with me, old thing?’

‘Well yes, and er ... no,’ said Lucille. ‘That is, I mean I’m not normally inquisitive. Indeed on one occasion you had the kindness to describe me as the soul of discretion, but this time my curiosity is getting the better of me. Maybe it’s a female thing, although many of my male writers have been nosy *ad nauseam*. But no, perhaps I shouldn’t ask and it would be better to suppress my desire for further information, wouldn’t it? Anyway it’s a delicate matter and I wouldn’t want to trample on sensitive ground – where angels fear to tread and all that sort of thing. On top of which intruding on a writer’s privacy would not be deemed appropriate behaviour for a Muse of my experience. On the other hand, you will admit that when you make statements of a particular nature, it is inevitable that you will arouse a certain ...’

‘Lucille,’ I said, smiling, ‘it’s not like you to beat around the bush and lay verbal smoke screens! Gracious me; you’ve got a dose of linguistic diarrhoea! If you want to know something, just come to the point and ask me. I can always say no, can’t I?’

Later:

Lucille burst into laughter: ‘Talk about me beating around the bush and laying verbal smoke screens! You are ten times worse. You’re telling me, as gently as possible, to mind my own business, aren’t you?’

‘Well, since you put it that way ...’

‘Oh, come now! We know each other too well for that kind of circumspection, even if well meant. I’m not that sensitive, you know. In future, if it’s an occasion to tell me to mind my own business, then just tell me. As a goddess, I am always able to see the bigger picture. In other words, I can take it.’

(From ‘A Spot Of Jealousy’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

181 **Living in the desert**

I have often likened the path of my life to going through a desert, wherein oases are provided for me when I need them, sometimes just when it seems that I cannot walk even one more step. The reason I chose this analogy is that the desert is one of the bleakest places on earth, and that's often how my inner life feels.

Yet what I now see is that anybody who goes into a desert does so with a purpose: that is, when it is the only way to get from where they are to where they want to be. Nobody goes into the desert for a relaxing stroll or an invigorating walk; country roads, forests, meadows and mountains maybe, but not the desert. I go into the desert because it is the only way to get to the greener pasture which lies beyond it. One of the many trials of being in the desert is that the landscape can be so repetitive – one dune is very much like another, by which I mean that the tribulations of life can often seem needlessly repetitive and one wonders what God can hope to achieve by allowing it so. In fact, each sand dune is unique and it is necessary to cross each and every one that lies in my path in order to get to the other side.

For a long time, I felt as if I didn't choose this route, that I had been cruelly dumped on it, without choice, and then left to my own devices. The truth, however, which has only become clear to me in the last couple of years* is that I said 'yes' to God's journey as early as at two years of age, that I have always been given the necessary provisions and protection for my journey, and that many of the oases have been incredibly more beautiful than any green land I left behind.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* This item was written in March 2002.

182 **True, but often forgotten**

There are times when a perfect moment can be spoiled by words, so I said nothing ...

(From 'Whose Tree?', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

183 **A sense of expectancy**

It was lunchtime and the café was very busy. Luckily, she spotted a table in a quiet corner, and ordered a pot of tea ... When the tea arrived, she had a few sips of the warming brew to refresh herself, then took the sealed envelope from her handbag and, as people are wont to do, looked at it on one side, then on the other, but did not open it immediately. She was savouring the sense of expectancy that had been placed in her heart. She would open it in a minute or so.

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

184 **Good news?**

I was recently visiting a town not too far distant from where I live ... and noticed that there is a small Christian book shop called 'Good News 4 U' on one of the principal streets. The most arresting item in the window was an electronic display transmitting, in bold colour graphics, to the window-gazer the following message:

*Are you in fear and trembling at the coming judgement?
You should be!*

So, that's the good news, is it? I wonder what the bad news is.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

185 **Mission statement**

Now, somehow, this all too familiar rings:
Once more to unreachable fancies he clings,
As if wishful thinking could make them take wings.
But he's not been given a daydream enchanted,
And he's just seen a way he's been taking for granted:
To blossom and grow in the place he's been planted.
So that now, when he has a song, he just sings,
A kind word of comfort, a soft kiss, he brings,
To touch those around him his heart ever springs,
For his mission is found in the everyday things.

(‘Everyday Things’, poem in *The Power Of Light*)

186 **Now that's rain!**

It was pouring with a vengeance, as if the sky wanted to exhaust its entire supply of H₂O before lunch; the wiper blades could scarcely keep up. That alone wasn't really cause for concern because, with the more usual, vertical rain, he could rely on the protection of the trusty golf umbrella which he kept in the boot for the purpose. On this occasion, however, the stuff was bucketing down in tandem with a force eight gale and the net result was water coming at all angles, and the umbrella would be about as effective against the maelstrom as trying to stop a heavy armoured tank with a peashooter, so there was no escape.

(From 'A Short Tale With A Long Tail', story in *Oh, My Head!*)

187 **The power of language in our minds**

For me, it has been the impression of a long lifetime that most people are not aware of the power of language. Consider two examples. First: advertisers all over the world spend countless billions every year using words to persuade us to buy all manner of goods and services. Why? Because they know it works. Second: we all know or have heard/read of people who were given toxic messages by others, particularly in childhood, and either struggle for years to get beyond the resulting self-beliefs or never get over them. It is my belief that the toxic messages we give ourselves are much more powerful because they are often insidious, maybe subliminal, and it is only when we acquire the requisite awareness that we can examine the unexplained malaise within us to discover that we have been poisoning ourselves with unjustified self-criticism, impossibly perfectionistic ideals, exaggerated expectations or whatever. By the same process, when we learn to give ourselves positive messages, they are also more powerful than the messages others give us. I often say to friends that if we are not kind to ourselves, others being kind to us will have little effect. Kind please note; that's healthy. Not self-indulgent; that's destructive.

(From a letter, August 2015)

188 **Becoming a child again – thank God!**

There is in this life no higher state than childhood.

(Julian of Norwich)

This, I imagine, would be difficult for anybody else to believe but, in the last five years, I have come to see with crystal clarity that I had a complete, unquestioning, beautifully simple understanding – a *knowledge* – that I was loved unconditionally by God as early as at two years of age.

At the deepest level, that knowledge has never left me but it got buried under a prolonged and relentless avalanche of religious teaching and social conditioning, under dogmas, doctrines, laws and theologies, empty traditions and anachronistic social conventions, the principal of which was that *blind faith* is the best that is available to us ...

What prompted this reflection is that, in recent times, I have been wondering why I often feel so much like a child again – so free in spirit. Now I realise that the gift has been given to me to rediscover the two-year-old, the child who *knows* he is loved unconditionally.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

189 **Say no more**

Listening is *the* most important communications skill.

(From 'Listening', in *Communications – A Course Manual*)

190 **One change, all change**

When I was at school, we had a subject called 'Religious Knowledge'. Regrettably much of it was religious indoctrination – albeit well-meant. Now that I have come into the realm of 'Spiritual Knowledge', I see that that one change of word signifies a difference of knowledge and experience so great that I can find neither simile nor metaphor to express it.

Religious knowledge can be shared with other people – indeed that was the purpose of the subject. Spiritual knowledge (as opposed to belief) is unique to each individual.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

191 **Now that's a compliment**

Lucille blushed a most delightful shade of pink. 'Er ... um ... that is ... I'm almost ashamed to ask; perhaps I ought not, but – well – I will; and please tell the truth, won't you? Am I ... am I really sexy?'

'Lucille, my treasure,' I responded without hesitation, 'you are the Muse with the mostest. You combine an intoxicating earthiness with a dreamlike eroticism, drawing on a provocative and beautifully contoured body, sylph-like choreography, full sensuous lips, a come-hither look in your deep, hazel eyes, a face that Leonardo da Vinci would have given his eye teeth to paint, and a voice like the peal of silver bells. Add to that your caring and gentleness, your warm, affectionate nature, and you get the full picture. In terms of sexuality, and in summary, you are the cat's pyjamas.'

(From 'Tell Me More', story in *Life With Lucille*)

192 **Do not throw your pearls to pigs (Matthew 7:6)**

One day, many years ago, a good king granted an audience to a well-known aesthete and received him most courteously, as indeed he received all his people. The visitor proceeded to expound at length on his sensitivity to and appreciation of the beautiful things of life, and told his royal host that his dearest wish was to be granted the privilege of seeing the crown jewels which the monarch kept safe in a vault deep in the bowels of the castle. He had never shown them to anybody because they were too precious, but he allowed himself to be swayed by his visitor's avid enthusiasm and apparent expertise and commanded his guards to go to the vault, take out a small selection of the finest pieces and place them in the castle courtyard for inspection.

The visitor looked at them for a few minutes without saying anything, then spat on the jewels and kicked them around violently, covering them with grit and dust, and breaking several of them.

(From 'Prudence', story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

193 **What is good music and literature?**

I am increasingly wary when I see certain music or literature (indeed any art form) described as ‘good’ or ‘great’ in such a way that this view seems to be prescribed for all of us, the term ‘canon’ often being used to denote a list of literary or artistic works considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality – established, presumably, by those ‘in the know’.

For me, *good* music or literature is that which entertains or enlivens in a wholesome way. *Great* music or literature touches the soul, and the *greatest* music or literature is that which connects me with the Divine. However, each person’s experience of what constitutes good, great or greatest in this context will be unique. Hence, if each person’s spiritual and intellectual integrity is to be honoured and respected, there can be no universal canon. For example, I find the score to the movie, *Sense and Sensibility* to be good and Beethoven’s sixth symphony to be great. However, some of the romantic songs rendered by Julio Iglesias, Andrea Bocelli, Julien Clerc, Guadalupe Pineda, Mylène Farmer and others, and the music of pianist/composer Ernesto Cortázar II are sublime and are much more powerful in putting me in touch with the Divine. I find P.G. Wodehouse’s writing to be good, Jane Austen’s to be great, but it is mostly my own writing that puts me in touch with the Divine. In short, I have my own canon. Thank God!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

194 **Gentle love**

I called to you this winter’s evening
On a visit of guileless intentions,
To share a little time with you
Wishing only the sincerity of my unaffected caring
To be communicated to the openness within you,
To spend an interval of peace in your gentle company,
Like resting with you beside quiet waters

(From ‘A Winter’s Tale’, poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

195 **Astonishing advances, but ...**

There have been astonishing technological advances since the Industrial Revolution, but manufacturers of close-coupled toilet suites, as they are called (where the cistern sits directly on the bowl), still haven't come up with a toilet seat that stays upright unaided.

Surely there is an enlightened designer out there who could resolve this problem. Such a breakthrough would benefit both sexes ... and if I have to explain what I mean by that, I'm obviously in touch with the wrong target audience!

Oh yes, and another thing: it's nearly fifty years since we achieved the seemingly impossible and put a man on the moon, but we still can't make a teapot that doesn't drip.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

196 **What does Lucille look like?**

'Lucille,' I said, 'seeing that you almost invariably communicate with me by means of intuitive nudges from the ethereal mists of my imagination, I've grown kind of curious about your appearance. What do you look like?'

'How do you picture me?' she responded.

'You must be a Kerry Muse,' I said ruefully, 'answering one question with another like that.'

'No.' She laughed. 'I'm not; but do tell me – how do you picture me.'

'Oh, all right then, if you insist. I see you as tall and shapely, fair-skinned, even pale sometimes, long raven tresses tumbling about your shoulders, delicate facial features, ruby lips and eyes that shine like the stars, and ... er ... I hope you don't mind my mentioning it, but I rather fancy that you wear few clothes; none more likely. I mean, goddesses usually don't, do they? But enough of this fantasy. Well?'

I awaited the definitive version from Lucille's own lips.

'That,' she whispered enigmatically, 'is exactly how I look.'

(*It's All In The Mind*', story in *Life With Lucille*)

197 **Encouragement for a fellow writer**

‘But I couldn’t write a novel!’ I hear you declare.

Why the hell not? Of course you could. It doesn’t have to be one of those six-hundred-page blockbusters. One of the world’s most successful novelists, Paulo Coelho, produces novels that are 40,000 to 60,000 words in length. There are 700 words in the amazing piece you sent me. Let us assume that you cannot muster up the enthusiasm to write similar quantity or quality every day. Let us be realistic and assume that you can do it two days most weeks and the odd extra day here and there when you feel motivated. Your novel will be completed well before the end of this year. Thereafter it is a question of refining and editing.



Writing a novel may not be what you want to do, or may be quite daunting, yet the piece you wrote is so good that it really deserves some company. So here is my idea: suppose each time you go to the coffee shop or wherever you write, you produce a similar word picture and when you have got a good number of them together, you might just simply collect them together as ‘Portraits of a Life’, in which case they need not be connected in any way but are utterly justified in and of themselves in the same way as the varying paintings in an art gallery would be. This would leave you wonderfully free to write spontaneously from the heart on each occasion giving no thought to the cohesiveness of a larger work.

(From two letters, February and March 2004)

198 **Look for the language of the eyes**

She tells the truth in every guise;
Yet she’s too shy to authorise
Her heart to plainly verbalise,
So, just this once, speaks counterwise:
‘No, no, I love thee not,’ she cries,
But there’s a ‘yes, yes’ in her eyes.

(From ‘Idol Eyes’, poem in *Voice Of The Man-child*)

199 **Boarding school**

Like so many other Irish people, my mother and father had emigrated to England in the late nineteen thirties. I was born in Surrey during the Second World War and we lived in a comfortable home in a charming London suburb for the happiest days of my younger life. At eleven, however, I was despatched to a boarding school in Sussex. My mother had been ill since I was three and I used to spend much of my time with her rather than going out to play with the other children, and had become part carer at an early age. My father felt that this wasn't healthy for a growing boy – and an only child at that – so off I went.

(From 'Seeing The Bigger Picture', essay in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

200 **Spiritual principles?**

I have often come across the term 'Spiritual principles' and have heard it used even by a number of people whom I greatly respect. For example, the inspirational Indian mystic and humanitarian, Amma, says: *Spiritual principles are very much necessary to feel love and express it in our day to day lives.*

But I have a question: what are spiritual principles? I don't understand the term. Spirituality is Love. That's it. This is not a reductionist view. When one receives even the smallest experience of the immensity of God's Love, and sees how it guides us in every aspect of our lives, and, having come to that point, how we will spontaneously want to respond in love, nothing else is needful. Love, that is divine Love, is not a principle, it's an energy – pure, unconditional, steadfast, infinite, all-powerful energy. Put more simply, Love just *is*. One of my writings which is most dear to me is a semi-autobiographical novel entitled *Black On Magenta*. The final five of its 102,000 words are 'Love is all there is.'

Perhaps I am missing something, but what principles are they talking about?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

201 **Nothing serious**

(Note: on the Enterprise Express train from Dublin to Belfast, I noticed reflective glass over my head!)

In spite of her eccentric pose,
I'm taken with her beauty,
To such degree you must concede
To gaze at her's sheer duty.
Her hair's behaving as it should,
Viz. tumbling down her shoulders;
Her earrings dangle north to south,
Not upward from their holders
Her face is fair, not blood-rush red,
Her eyes, though turned, still lure;
Her ruby lips are concave lush
Though convex I feel sure.
Her necklace hangs in seemly grace,
Not o'er her nose suspended;
Her part-seen breasts are trim and set,
Not northwardly extended.
From waist to toe she's clothed, demure,
Full covered by her gown –
And all of which a mystery, since
This woman's upside down.

*(‘No Gravity’, poem in *A Little Of What I Fancy*)*

202 **Should I be careful what I pray for?**

On a good number of occasions over the years, I have heard people say, ‘Be careful what you pray for!’ Some meant it light-heartedly, but many of them were quite serious.

I have no comment to make on their perception; that's none of my business. But a lifetime of seeing it differently leads me to express my ongoing experience in this way: I simply cannot conceive of a God who would give me what is not good for me simply because I asked him. I have never come across such a God. And I never will.

*(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)*

203 **Depression may be ...**

In my case, it sometimes seems like ‘suppression’ rather than ‘depression’, and when I find out what I am suppressing, I can begin to deal with it ... Looking at it like this, I began to realise that, *for me*, ‘depression’ is not just a shapeless, dense, black cloud over which I have absolutely no control, rather identifiable aspects of myself with which I can deal *if and when I am willing*.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

204 **Oh, to be back in Eden!**

‘Make haste, O God, the world is drear;
We’ll never stick the pace out here!’

(From ‘Adam Laments’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

205 **Goddam guilt**

‘As I have often said before, guilt is seriously corrosive, the most useless emotion of the lot, in fact; causes a lot of harrowing and unnecessary mental self-flagellation. Its only role is to alert us where we are going wrong. Thereafter, in an ideal world, we dismiss guilt and set about righting the wrong, if we can, and then just get on with our lives. But the trouble is that this confounded emotion often lingers on and leaves us with a sort of creeping malaise that destroys our peace of mind. And it goes without saying, but I will say it anyway, that guilt is the stock-in-trade of your typical perfectionist. You know how it is – drives you to accomplish feats that are impossible, then gives you a hard time when you fail, as fail you must, does its creeping malaise thing without so much as by your leave. I ought to know! What do you think, Lucille?’

‘Hmmm, guilt! Thankfully, I have never experienced this creeping malaise of which you speak. It sounds perfectly dreadful. Although I do have a sort of second-hand understanding of the emotion, through vicarious identification with my many writers over the centuries.’

(From ‘This One’s On Me’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

206 **Digital technology – and the simple life**

Digital technology has many important benefits, particularly, in my view, in the fields of medicine and communications. However, I cannot help but feel, when I look at the wider applications and their fruits, together with future possibilities, that we have created a monster, one that, in terms of the potential for invading our privacy and dictating the course of our lives, makes some science fiction look like fairy tales, that makes unsavoury and pernicious material, and inaccurate and (sometimes deliberately) misleading information available to billions at the click of a mouse or a tap on a screen, that contributes to the electromagnetic pollution which surrounds us, that has created the phenomenon of cyber-bullying, that ... need I go on? And it has got to the point that we have to feed it constantly or it will devour us. It may well do so anyway.

Consequently I have a love/hate relationship with it. I love word processing, desktop publishing, email, video conferencing and smartphones, and hate so-called social media, the vulnerability of computer systems, and computer and software companies' penchant for frequent and unnecessary upgrades – a policy that used to be known as planned obsolescence. Really, in balance, I'd be better off with an old-fashioned telephone and a typewriter. Or would I? *Sigh!* See what I mean?

Oh, for the simple life!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

207 **Living with Fred can be very trying**

Okay, so I won that skirmish, but the battle will continue. I sighed and a careworn expression took up residence on my face. Coping daily with Fred's caprices was beginning to wear me down. Of course it all depends on your perspective, doesn't it? My reader, displaying a lamentable lack of sympathy, undoubtedly regards these harrowing accounts of my mental warfare as light entertainment. Oh well, so be it. I always aim to please. So don't miss the next exciting episode!

(From 'The Best Things In Life', story in *Life With Fred*)

208 **Pet hates**

Like most people, I imagine, I have a number of pet hates. I find the ones that bug me most frequently are a) people who don't do what they say they're going to do, and b) the mindless noise, alias background music, that infests so many places of business these days; worse, invasive television everywhere from the barber's shop to hospital waiting rooms. It seems that, increasingly, people can neither keep a promise nor stand the sound of silence, nor endure too long without visual stimulation. Oh, and one more: the once friendly homeland which now returns my greetings with hostile stares that wordlessly proclaim I should be locked away to protect the public from the ravages of my civility, and leave it to wallow undisturbed in its new-found alienation.

(From 'For Better – Or For Worse?', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

209 **Attachment to the things of this world**

Spiritual writers have, for centuries, written about the grave dangers of attachment to material things, even to people. If we swallow this view whole, we can regard things and our fellows as an evil to be avoided, beyond what is absolutely essential, and asceticism in semi-hermitic poverty as the only existence worth espousing. The truth is that, while there is much here to give great concern, our planet and what it contains (and I don't mean just material things) are beautiful gifts from God to sustain us in this life.

A far more balanced, sensible and nurturing view is that, since people, places, things and situations are indeed gifts from God, it is the *nature* of the attachments which renders them healthy or unhealthy for us. A key concept here, I suggest, is 'balance in all things'.

I believe that what is important, where the attachments are or may become unwholesome for us, is a willingness to let them go. Then, even when we find it impossible to let them go, God takes our willingness and removes them from us as and when he sees fit.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

210 **Amusing signs**

‘I say,’ said Fred animatedly. ‘Do you remember the photo you took of that hilarious sign at the airport years ago: “Duty Free Toilets”! The signwriter had omitted to put a suitable division between the words indicating the location of the two separate facilities, thus implying the airport management’s solicitude for its patrons.’

‘What?’

‘They didn’t want a visit to the loo to be a taxing experience!’

‘Oh, very funny, Fred. You’re in full flight this morning. However, there’s an even funnier sign in the window of that shop over there.’

‘Which one?’

‘Next to the traffic lights; see it? The Stitchery. They do alterations to garments and that sort of thing and, if you will observe, there is a sign in the window announcing to would-be customers that they do “Bridal Alterations”.’

‘So?’ said Fred. He can be a bit slow at times.

‘Well, can’t you just see the seamstress’s face if you were to take your bride-to-be into the shop and say, “I saw the sign in your window. Could you give her a breast enlargement please; and a nose job and a spot of liposuction here and there wouldn’t do any harm while you’re at it!”’

‘Ha, ha, ha,’ laughed my inner companion. ‘Very good; I hadn’t spotted that connotation. Hmmm! I wonder why they don’t have a sign announcing to would-be customers that they do “Bridegroom Alterations” as well. I mean, can’t you just see the seamstress’s face if a woman were to take her bridegroom-to-be into the shop and say, “I saw the sign in your window. Could you lengthen his ...”’

‘Fred, behave yourself! You ought to know better than to ...’

‘... trousers,’ said Fred.

(From ‘Signs Of The Times’, story in *Life With Fred*)

211 **Healing droplets**

More eloquent than words,
More wholesome than balm,
More cleansing than water,
More soothing than calm:

Tears.

(From 'The Gift Of Tears', poem in *From The Cradle Of Eternity*)

212 **The adult child**

I have functioned pretty efficiently as an adult: married and given a good start in life to four now-adult children, ran a large company for nearly ten years, then held a demanding profession for a further twenty-seven years, and interacted with other humans in a generally mature, efficient and civil way. Not all this has been easy; there have been problems – some significant – and disappointments, yet I have coped well, all in all.

This being the case, why am I, at times, so sensitive, easily hurt, compassionate to the degree that I tend to absorb other people's pain, and pretty much feel like I have very little emotional insulation? It's because a part of me never grew up; a part of me is still three years old. When somebody says or does something hurtful, it is not the adult who has weathered the storm that gets hurt, but the three-year-old. And I didn't get that out of any popular psychology books or discussions with therapists of one kind or another. I have been aware of this inner child since long before I heard the notion enunciated by others ...

Having a three-year-old inside me is not *all* about hurt and vulnerability; not at all. Most of the time it's wonderful; it has kept me young at heart and helped me for years to relate to the many young people with whom I worked. Also the inner child is where I get my sense of fun and wonder from, for instance going to salsa dancing recently, and the ability to get to the top of a mountain, behold the wondrous vista before me and just say, 'Wow!'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

213 **Messages of hope from the car radio**

I have just had to take a quick break from writing this letter and go on an errand in my car. I switched the radio on, and a man was reading a story he had written about his life. There had been much pain, but contentment at last, and the story finished with the line *I now realise that I had to experience the dark, in order to appreciate the light.* And on the way back home just now, there was an interview with an American women who runs writing workshops for low-income women in the US, most of whom have suffered the ravages of alcoholism in their homes, and she read a beautiful piece she had written; I only wish I could have recorded it, but it was about life being like the seasons of the year, that the winter of affliction is followed by the new birth of spring. Maybe it is no accident that I heard these pieces on my car radio in the middle of writing this letter to you – maybe a message to encourage you to have great hope.

(From a letter, September 1997)

214 **The reason for doubt**

I have come to realise in recent years that, as a child, I had a simple, intuitive, unquestioning knowledge of the mystical which required no proof in the temporal realm. Conditioning, brought about by absorbing education, socially accepted norms, peer pressure, even some religious formation, taught me to accept, in so-called ‘maturity’, nothing that did not lend itself to tangible (e.g. scientific) proof. As I have said elsewhere, things of the spirit *cannot* be proved by the finite human intellect.* Nevertheless, since spirituality is experienced in a totally different dimension to the material, the absence of material proof, because of this conditioning, can cause me to doubt on occasion, particularly when the going gets rough.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See the essay, *Memo From A Former Atheist*. There are two versions: the short Mk I, and the much more detailed Mk II. Mk I is in the Appendix (see page 651).

215 **This hurts me more than it hurts you**

My only daughter smiled lovingly at me,
Late one evening,
And asked if all was well,
But I did not reply
Because I had a bee in my bonnet
About some earlier infringement of the household rules.
So I brought the subject firmly up,
She answered me insolently back,
And I shouted at her in frustration and anger.
There was no need, really no need,
And I realised in dismay, as she disintegrated into tears,
That it served no purpose, save that of pushing us apart.
She had simply given her developing emotions an outing,
For she was just being a normal, impulsive teenager;
And I had simply gone way over the top,
For I was just being a normal, inadequate parent.
She got upset,
So did I,
And we ended the day without our usual, affectionate hug.

Straight away, she went to bed,
Considered the injustice of it for a few moments,
Then dried her tears,
And slept like a baby.

Shortly thereafter, I went to bed,
Considered the injustice of it for a few hours,
Then propped myself up on the pillows,
And cried the night through.

(‘Parent’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

216 **Have I found my niche?**

I feel more at home in a graveyard than at a party. My companions in the graveyard are at peace and no longer jockey for social position, indulge in character assassination or talk bullshit.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

217 **No poem today, it seems**

I was endeavouring to write a love poem of sublime beauty, and had selected a coffee shop known for the softness of its background music. Today, however, for some inexplicable reason, the proprietor had decided to inflict a dire selection of the loud, pulsating variety on the unsuspecting clientele.

‘Oh, Yuk! Rock music!’

‘A little rock ’n roll is okay,’ said Lucille. ‘It was hard to get used to at first, but it has grown on me. Actually, I rather like it now – in small doses, mind you.’

‘Oh, yeah, terrific,’ I agreed reluctantly. ‘But there’s a time and place for everything, Lucille; and an occasion, such as this, when I am trying to compose verses which will endear me to future generations of poetry lovers is not one of them. With your assistance, my sweet, I was about to produce words of ethereal beauty, but a musical diet of:

*Hey you there, sexy blue jeans,
How’s about we gettin’ it all together,
And makin’ love like cool, baby,*

doesn’t exactly stimulate one to thrust one’s literary genius to new frontiers, does it?’

(From ‘Cool It’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

218 **Childlike it is**

My life has been very difficult. Nothing unusual about that, and I am neither complaining nor looking for sympathy. The reason I mention it is that there is a vein running through me that is sure that God will eventually make the path smoother, and I describe this assurance as childlike, meaning that it is like the simple trust of a child. All to the good. However, when I am in darkness for an extended period and it seems as if it will never go away, I find a voice in my head saying, ‘Downgrade that silly belief to “childish”.’ Thankfully, there is another, and stronger voice, that counters, ‘Don’t *ever* downgrade it to “childish”.’ Right then, childlike trust it is. It’s the only way.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

219 **TMI!**

TMI! I heard my daughter use this expression a couple of years ago; I hadn't heard it before and I asked her what it meant. Quite simply: too much information. In almost everything one looks at, researches, examines, learns, there is just too much information or, to use another current expression, we are suffering from information overload – and I mean suffering. This stuff has the capacity to do one's head in. And it clutters up one's spirit as well. One example: I wanted to learn about a particular process earlier this year (2014), and I did an online seminar for the purpose. Since commitments prevented me from attending every session, I bought the downloadable material for later perusal. Now, the process itself is very simple and can be learned in a few minutes. What takes the time is the practice to apply it successfully. But in essence it is very simple. And the download: eight gigabytes! I concede that some of the material comprised movie interviews with people who use and endorse the process, and movies are memory hungry. But eight gigabytes. To give you an idea, just one of the eighty or so items was a three-hundred-page workbook!

The problem is that, with the rapid evolution of computer technology, the situation is rapidly getting worse: more and more and more information. I was searching for something straightforward on the web the other day and got over a billion results in less than a second! That wasn't a misprint: I mean one billion.

What happens then is that the information inevitably starts to conflict – the pros and the cons seeming equally convincing, leaving one not knowing who to listen to or what to take on board, therefore more confused. I have had to evolve a strategy to deal with this situation, and it's this: while I undoubtedly need some basic information on the subject I am considering, I am increasingly relying on my gift of intuition to guide me.

TMI! Oh, for the simple life!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

220 **Do we know how loved we are?**

Why do you encircle my life with rainbows
In the midst of the storm,
Waft cool breezes onto my body
When I am lost in the desert,
And let crystal droplets fall onto my tongue
When I falter in overwhelming thirst?
Why do you light up my sky with a million stars
When I am swathed in darkness,
Nurture me with tender murmurings and touches
When the child in me needs compassion,
And console me with words of healing
That speak directly to my spirit?

(From 'Timing', poem in *Hang On!*)

221 **Whom does God help?**

*God helps those who help themselves.**

Nonsense! This is well up the list of the most damaging things that have ever been said. So many have interpreted it as meaning that God won't help us until we have at least found some of the solution all by ourselves. In this case, God becomes a conditional God and that is unthinkable – impossible in fact. God helps the helpless for goodness' sake.

Hopefully, what the originator of this aphorism really meant was:

God gives each of us gifts according to our individual needs (not our wants!) at the outset, and then asks us to use them to the best of our ability. When they run out or fail to produce the required outcome (God's outcome), he then weighs in with reinforcements to help the helpless.

Yes indeed, the more I think of it the more I feel certain that this is what the good president – if indeed it was he – must have had in mind. In that case, why the hell didn't he say so?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Well-known quotation, attributed to a number of different sources, most popularly US president Benjamin Franklin.

222 **‘Spirituality’ – not a popular word**

Many people are wary of the word ‘spirituality’. Amazing really; from the world’s media to barroom conversations, pretty much anything goes nowadays, journalistic, moral, ethical and personal standards virtually non-existent. Yet mention spirituality, and there is not infrequently an uneasiness or downright hostility – as if people fear they are going to be evangelised.

But what if I had discovered the most extraordinary treasure ... and, far from keeping it to myself, wanted ... to share it with everybody? One can imagine people reaching out for it with open arms.

The problem is this: if I had worldly treasure and wanted to share it, it would simply be a question of apportioning it with as much wisdom as I could. Where spiritual treasures are concerned, however, each person must find his/her own, and the best I can do is encourage them with stories of my treasure – and then only when and where it is appropriate to do so.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

223 **Publication?**

‘I was just thinking, though, it’s a pity you have had only minimal publication. The work deserves a wider public, and the wider public deserves the work. I feel you should give it a try.’

‘Yes, I know all that, Lucille, but it’s too much trouble. Fruitlessly plying dozens of literary agents or publishers with one’s manuscript only boosts the profits of the postal service. Then, even if one does strike it lucky, there’s all that rewriting and correcting to pander to what some professional editor thinks the public will like, promotion, book signings, being asked idiotic questions on second-rate arts programmes that have a listenership of two. All this effort to be told, after two years, that sales have now topped the one hundred and fifty mark. No, it’s not worth it, old thing. Count me out.’

(From ‘God Loves A Trier’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

224 **Atheism? No thanks**

I have a dear friend who has had a difficult life, to say the least, but he has always had a solid faith which has sustained him through all the vicissitudes. I hadn't seen him for a while and bumped into him one day when, as it turned out, he was going through a particularly bad patch.

'How are you?' I asked

'Ah hell! I think I'm an atheist. Faith my arse!' He said no more, but looked at me in a way that told me he was hoping against hope that I might say something to dispel his despair.

I reflected in prayerful silence for just a few moments, then responded quietly, 'Only the self-sufficient or, more accurately, those who *think* they are self-sufficient can get away with being atheists. People like you and me who are fucked up* can't afford to be atheists.'

He breathed a sigh of relief, laughed and said, 'Thanks a million. That's exactly what I needed to hear. Feel better now. Talk to you soon. Bye.'

As it transpired, it was exactly what I needed to hear at the time too. God sure works in strange ways!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* In other words, most 'normal' people!

225 **Bonus time**

When my four children were quite small, I had to have medical tests as I suspected that there might be something sinister going on. I made one simple prayer: 'Please leave me here until my children are taken care of.'

I have seen them mature into their thirties and early forties, get set up in life, and, most important of all, become wonderful people, a privilege and a joy to be around. And I have lived to come to know three lovely daughters-in-law and see the arrival of seven beautiful grandchildren, three girls and four boys, the most recent in September 2015.

I'm in bonus time. No wonder my heart is filled with gratitude.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

226 **Teaching Jasmine to sleep**

'I'll drive you home, and you can have a good rest. A night's sleep works wonders.'

'A night's sleep?'

'Yes. You look surprised.'

'But fairies – at least, my lot – don't sleep.'

'Never?'

'No, never.'

I was amazed. 'But surely you need sleep to restore your tissues and rebuild your energies for the following day.'

'Ken, you're forgetting that fairies are not like humans. When our energies flag, which is a pretty rare occurrence, we simply work a bit of magic to restore them.'

'Well, how about trying some magic on restoring your wings?'

'I did, while you were making the tea, but it didn't work, worse luck.'

'Well, what have you got to lose by trying a little sleep. You might get to like it?'

She looked doubtful. 'I don't know. How would I do it?'

'You imagine an enormous field with thousands of sheep in it, and you just start counting them.'

(From 'In The Swim', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

227 **Controlling or letting go?**

I had management training that may be summarised as: your mission is to control consumer responses, premises, personnel activity, stocks, finances, regulatory control and, above all, profits; and if any of these get out of control, you had better get them back under control fast or you're out of a job.

This may work in the public domain, but when I bring this type of thinking into my private life, and particularly my spiritual life, it's a disaster. The notion that I am in control of my life is pure illusion. The only philosophy that works is to let go absolutely, i.e. total, loving surrender to the God of my understanding.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

228 **Plea to a favourite author – Jane Austen**

Could I but yet persuade thee, Jane:
Pray, take me to a higher plane
To write in style refined, like thine,
Though blended with apt shades of mine.

Could I but own thine eagle's eye,
The finest detail to descry,
And borrow thine esteemed ability
To write with sense and sensibility.

Could I but scribe with righteous pride,
Thy genius now become my bride,
A mate for my creative bliss,
A union without prejudice,
Thy voice, through me, would speak once more,
With me, would'st thou again explore
The greatest deeds of little lives,
And all that narrow world contrives.

Permit me, hence, to be thy pen,
And write of now, as thou of then.
Thou scarce canst slight this rare equation?
Succumb, then, to my keen persuasion.

(‘Persuasion’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

229 **More on guilt**

Guilt has been described as ‘toxic guilt’ – rightly in my view since it poisons our souls and destroys our peace of mind. For example, well-meaning people have said things like: ‘Our anxiety is in direct proportion to our distance from God.’ This may suit some, but for most, that kind of thing is about as helpful as an ashtray on a motorbike. It creates guilt, giving a false message that if I’m anxious it must be my fault. But putting guilt in its proper place does not mean that it has no function. Its *sole* purpose is to alert us to where we’re in error. Thereafter we relinquish guilt and set about righting the wrong.

(From Part 5 of *Getting The Balance Right – Lecturer’s Seminar Guide*)

230 **No renunciation**

He who has God finds he lacks nothing: God alone suffices.

(Teresa of Ávila)

I read recently that medieval philosophy had a dictum that every choice is a renunciation. Wisdom indeed! Most choices, when one comes to think of it, involve many renunciations. When I marry one person, I renounce all the others whom I might have married. When I choose to have and raise a family, I renounce many other things that I could have done with the commitment, energy, time and financial resources. Even when I choose to have a cup of coffee, I renounce the tea, hot chocolate and herbal infusions that I could have had.

No wonder making even simple choices is often so difficult.

No wonder, equally, that we bring that kind of thinking into our relationship with God: that is, when we choose God, we renounce all sorts of things. What we think we have to renounce will depend on our religious conditioning, formal education and upbringing.

One of the stupendous realisations for me in recent years is this: in choosing God, I renounce nothing, but gain everything. I do acknowledge, however, that one needs to have been brought into a particular perspective, followed by a corresponding, solid experience in order to see things this way. An intellectual grasp of this proposition has little value on its own.

I used the term 'been brought' because it was not my doing. My only input was to yearn for closeness with My God. Yearning is surely a choice that one makes, probably subconsciously and at an early age, at the deepest level of one's being. Yet, I believe that if the circumstances are right, a yearning can become a profound part of one's being at any age.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

231 **Fred in pessimistic mood**

‘Who wouldn’t be pissed off? All is misery and melancholy; devastation and depression everywhere. Every news bulletin spews out nothing but reports of massacres, murders, rapes, robberies and worse. Man’s inhumanity to man; woman’s too no doubt. There is no hope, none. The planet is fucked, and so is everybody on it.’

(From ‘Now That’s Pessimism’, story in *Life With Fred*)

232 **Trying – in vain – to cheer Fred up**

‘And don’t forget,’ I went on, keeping the telling phrase to round off my words of wisdom and encouragement, ‘behind every dark cloud ...’

Fred got there before me: ‘... there’s an even darker one.’

(From ‘Now That’s Pessimism’, story in *Life With Fred*)

233 **Peace of mind and peace of spirit**

I have discovered that peace of mind is by no means the same as peace of spirit. When somebody who really wants to know asks me how I am, I use the analogy of my being like the deepest part of the ocean. At the deepest level, everything is in perfect order; the currents are doing what they are supposed to be doing; shoals of fish are swimming in perfect unison; the marine plants wave slowly and gracefully as if symbols of absolute serenity. The surface, however, is choppy most of the time and stormy rather too frequently for my liking.

This is because my spirit *knows* that fundamentally all is well, but my personal experience of the human condition leaves me with little peace of mind in the traditional sense.

So, I have peace of spirit, but not peace of mind. That means that I am whole where it counts most ...

The short answer to anybody who genuinely wants to know how I am on occasions when the surface is choppy or stormy, but doesn’t want the full unabridged version, is: ‘I am all right but I don’t feel all right!’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

234 **Balanced hindsight**

Finally, and probably most importantly, what do you do about those nagging doubts, as time goes by, that you should have done this, or you should have done that, or if you had known earlier, or if you had been in Ireland, or if circumstances had been in some other way different? There is only one way to live in serenity about this whole matter, and that is to recognise that with the information available to you *at the time*, with the trauma of short notice about such an important happening, given to you *at the time*, and especially given your highly understandable distressed state of mind *at the time*, you made the best possible decision *at the time*.

We can all be wise in hindsight. Ten thousand things can happen later that might alter an earlier decision, but you did not have that information *at the time*. Please accept my assurances that there have been several major events in my life, where I had to take distressing decisions, and would have later changed them, but I am happy in the knowledge now, that it was the only thing to do – yes you guessed it – *at the time*.

(From a letter, August 1993)

235 **Laying it on the line for Fred**

‘Fred, old man, you are overlooking a couple of minor complications. If you want to go damsel hunting, you will, in the first instance, possessing no means of transport of your own, have to get my permission to borrow my body. According to current opinion, based on centuries of experience, it seems that women are not particularly fond of hobnobbing with disembodied voices. Secondly, you will then have to seek my approval to bring the dear lady to reside with you in my head. On both counts – and let’s be absolutely clear on this – nothing doing! Get it? As far as having a relationship with anybody outside yourself is concerned, you’re stuck with me for the duration.’

(From ‘Happy Anniversary’, story in *Life With Fred*)

236 **Hope, expectations and optimism**

I have always been a bit foggy on the relationship between hope and expectations. One thing I do know from experience is that many unrealistic expectations can cause long-term problems when they are unfulfilled. But I cannot conceive of hope ever causing any trouble.

Can one have hope without an accompanying expectation? Generally, I think not. If I am in a difficult situation, but hope that it will pass, it usually means that I have an expectation that it will actually improve. But I do believe that it is possible, albeit difficult, to find the freedom to have hope in the purest sense without an attachment to a specific expectation. Hope, in this sense, is akin to optimism – that most desirable of qualities that enables us to perceive the ‘best of all possible worlds’ in the direst of circumstances. Or to put it in the words of Julian of Norwich, one of my favourite people in history: *All shall be well, and all shall be well, and thou shalt see for thyself that all manner of thing shall be well.* It is the kind of hope founded on what can only be an intuitive acknowledgement that, regardless of appearance or circumstance, fundamentally all is well. This kind of hope is a gift. It is the kind of hope that I hope for. And pray for.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

237 **Posthumous fame**

‘Indeed, I was remarking to my daughter, only the other day, that she would have all these writings to show to her children and grandchildren, to whom they will probably give pleasure – even if only because they were penned by an ancestor – and they, in turn, will very likely pass them on to future generations. I reckon, Lucille, that I could – in the fullness of time – finish up with a substantial following, though I will have to savour most of the complimentary remarks from a higher place!’

(From ‘Follow That’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

238 **Are we independent in anything?**

I have written elsewhere that I am dependent on the God Of My Life even for the next breath, for each thought, for the tiniest detail of my life in whatever form one wishes to express it. But does God give us independence in anything? Yes, and in the most crucial area of all, remembering of course that this independence comes from him in the first place, so that we are ‘dependently independent’ in this context. And it is this: I believe God gives us *absolute freedom of choice*, absolute in the sense that he allows us to make choices and will not attempt to influence those choices. And why do I label this ‘the most crucial area of all’? Because, if God did not give us freedom of choice, but obliged us to conform, he would not be *unconditionally* loving. His love is unconditional and, by definition, allows us choice as to whether to love in return, and also choices in other facets of our lives. Similarly, in ways I don’t fully understand, I firmly believe that he so arranges things that our love is entirely independent of his. If, in loving him, we were merely returning his Love, what would be the point?

Perhaps faith, ultimately, is our use of this gift of choice and our love freely given, in concert with God’s grace.

Our choices may be limited by any number of factors, from genetics to illness, and from opportunity to environment, but no matter how limited they are, we still have choices ... In situations of extreme illness, where the person seems barely alive, I firmly believe that, at the deepest level, beyond the intellect and human perception or understanding, the person’s spirit still makes choices for them.

I am glad beyond measure that I chose My Beautiful One.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

239 **Leadership**

Leadership, at its core, is about communicating your goals and your enthusiasm to others in such a way that they become their goals and their enthusiasm.

(From ‘Introduction’ in *Communications – A Course Manual*)

240 **Well, well!**

*The well of Providence is deep.
It's the buckets we bring to it that are small.*
(Mary Webb)

It is my impression that the word 'Providence' is used as an impoverished substitute for the living God. It is employed where people seem embarrassed to speak of God. I sense no such impoverishment or embarrassment in Mary Webb's words. She knows that God is a giver and that he longs to give us what is good for us. Much of it he gives without being asked – the gift of life itself for example. But in other matters, for other requests, he waits to be asked.

I note that, on many occasions in the past, I have brought a thimble to the well: 'It's selfish to ask for that,' or 'God is too busy with matters of greater importance to bother himself with my small concerns.' As I have written elsewhere, God doesn't limit us, we limit God. When I bring even the tiniest, highest-class problem to God, he wants to hear it and he wants to help. How many times, for example, have I asked for a parking spot where none was available, and one suddenly appeared! I now bring items of much smaller import than this to him ...

It is wise, however, for me to remember that God will *not* provide me with what is not good for me. Equally I will not agonise as much if I recall my lifelong experience that God frequently does not provide for me according to *my* way and time. In my humanity, I can often suffer when I think I am not being heard by God, when I am not receiving what I asked for. But he always provides exactly what I need at the perfect moment, even if I don't see it that way.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

241 **Daily bread**

I cannot live on yesterday's miracles. I need one today.

(From 'The Dance Goes On', draft sequel to the novel
Black On Magenta)

242 **My approach to teaching personal development**

My philosophy in giving this course includes saying to participants in the opening minutes of the first talk, ‘I have nothing to teach you!’ Upon which they might respond, ‘In that case what the **** did we pay the fee for then?!’

I then explain as follows: ‘Let us see what we would mean if we both believed I had something to teach you. *The Chambers Dictionary* defines ‘teach’ as ‘to impart knowledge or art to’. Thus for me to attempt to impart knowledge to you would be saying, ‘I know something you don’t know and if you learn it and implement it you will be better off.’ That, *for me*, would be a supreme arrogance. My sole objective is to share thoughts, experiences, perspectives and – at the very most – suggestions with you. Take what is right for you and leave the rest aside. Besides, I can’t tell you anything you don’t already know deep down in the essence of you. It is my hope that what I am going to present to you in the coming talks will help you to access it, or refresh your acquaintance with it if you have already accessed it.’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

243 **True patience**

True patience is a gift. Well isn’t everything?

Patience is not stoic, sweet-smiling acceptance of the unacceptable; it is not teeth-gritting forbearance awaiting better things in the future; it is not battling blindly on down the road of life through thick and thin without pausing for reflection on whether I am on the right path; it is not saying ‘yes’ when I mean ‘no’; it is not ignoring my boundaries and letting everyone and everything invade my territory.

Patience is the purposeful execution not of the cosmic plan, but merely of the next right step in the sure *knowledge* that *everything* is being perfectly worked out in my life by My Beautiful One. I cannot dredge this kind of patience up from the depths of my own being; it is a gift from God – as is knowing what is the next right step!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

244 **Remembering the war and the years following**

I was born just outside London in the middle of the war, and lived from then on in the London suburbs – except when things got really hot. Toward the end of the war, the Germans were targeting London with the V1s and V2s (the ‘flying bombs’ as we used to call them). They made a whistling sound in flight and, as a very young child, I used to run into the house and shout ‘The flying bombs, the flying bombs’ and we would repair to a steel air raid shelter that we had constructed in one of the rooms. One day, when we weren’t in residence, a flying bomb landed close enough to our house to blow out the back wall.

I was an only child and grew up very much in adult company – mainly my father’s. He took me frequently to his golf club and his office; he had a construction company. For many years, the frequent talk among his contemporaries was the Second World War and its aftermath, and I would just sit there and listen, taking it all in. My dad had contracts from the UK War Damage Commission, and I can well remember the vast amount of destruction still in evidence as I travelled around London with him. In the early post-war years, there was a plethora of movies about the war, featuring the real aircraft, many of which were still in service – the Spitfires, Hurricanes and so forth. We got television in 1946, and there were frequent programmes on the topic.

My dad had wanted to join the army construction corps for posting overseas, but my mother pleaded with him not to so he didn’t. He later told me that very few of the men who joined lived to tell the tale.

My dad used to take me to an annual air show at an RAF air base (Biggin Hill) where many of the wartime aircraft could be seen both in the air and on the ground.

Rationing of food and clothes was in force for a good while after the war, and I remember well the coupon books that my mother had to bring with her when going shopping.

(From a letter, March 2000)

245 **Seven deadly sins – or eight?**

I have read that some sources cite eight deadly sins, not seven. The commonly known seven are: pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth.

The most astonishing eighth that I have come across is what is described as ‘despond’. This ‘sin’ was an outlook of gloom and despair, chronic hopelessness, a sense of ‘what difference does it make?’ I try to avoid emotive language in these reflections of mine, but here I will indulge myself: what doddering old nincompoop of a half-brained, possibly inebriated, medieval theologian came up with that proposition? As if clinical depression and severe anxiety were a question of choice. God preserve us from such bizarre absurdities and from those who formulate them. Men and women who suffer from depression and anxiety need help not censure; they don’t need judgement, they need unconditional love. Indeed, don’t we all?

I would, however, like to add an eighth of my own, namely self-pity. I would have it head the list, because I believe that every form of perversity and evil stem from that egocentric starting point. I pray at the start of each day, and at any other time I see the need, to be kept free from it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

246 **Honesty and vanity**

If I had any sense, I wouldn’t even tell you about this episode, dear reader, because it could be seen as showing me up in a bad light. As a matter of fact, I wasn’t going to, but you know me for telling the truth, at least you should by now. Actually, honesty has got precious little to do with why I am giving you this particular account of my chats with Lucille. I include it because I think you might find it entertaining, even amusing, and think even more highly of me than you do already. More to do with vanity really. Mind you, that admission is honesty in itself, isn’t it?

(From ‘Honi Soit Qui Mal y Pense’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

247 **Material versus spiritual proof**

Most things in the material world that are not self-evident lend themselves to the provision of a proof that is acceptable to the general populace. Not so in matters of the spirit. Knowledge of God comes from beyond the boundaries of the material, the intellect, language or the senses; in other words, from profound personal experience in the spiritual realm, and each person must find his or her own proof.

(From 'Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II', essay in
Beyond The Rainbow)

248 **Education is wonderful, but ...**

Of course education, despite all its undoubted limitations, is wonderful. Without it, for instance, none of the words on these and other pages would have emanated from my pen. Nevertheless, education as commonly understood – that is, the period spent at primary school, secondary school and perhaps third level – is largely focused on developing the intellect, and analytical, reasoning, discursive and other practical abilities, and these are seen to be the outcomes to be desired from education. It's easy to see why: virtually all of the world's educational systems were devised following the Industrial Revolution in order to prepare people for work, and the hierarchy of subjects reflects that objective. It seems to me that one of the enormous prices we pay for this is that the intuitive and the creative have become devalued, distrusted or even ridiculed. I thank God that the intuitive was preserved in me, even though it got buried under the other stuff for a while, and that the creative re-emerged out of the blue in my late forties. I recognise and appreciate the great benefits of my education, but I value intuition and creativity much, much more, particularly the former, since it is the genesis of the latter. And I appreciate them not alone for their tremendous intrinsic value, but because they are much more accurate and nurturing than the intellectual stuff, and, most of all, because of where they come from.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

249 **The value of sayings and clichés.**

There are a number of situations – trying ones – in my life which have been going on for a long time, some of them for a very long time. One of the well-known sayings I have used to encourage myself to keep on going when I am really struggling is *It's a long road that has no turning*. I have discovered that to be profoundly true. When I look back, there are a number of significant roads in my life where, had I given up because of the difficulties, I would never have reached that turn in the road which enabled me to say, in effect, 'Wow, that's the beautiful view I have always been looking for – and it was worth the wait!' The only thing I had to do was stay on the road, and if I fell off to left or right, scramble back on to the road again, with appropriate help if necessary. But I had to stay on the road, and then *All things come in their season*. Many times things happened, particularly painful things, that seemed to have neither rhyme nor reason, but in the fullness of time, I came to see that they had a beneficial purpose to fulfil at a much later date, or *What goes around comes around*.

Short term, I can get away with things that may be unsuitable or inappropriate to my journey, but long term, if I want to be the person God created me to be, I cannot persist with the type of thinking or behaviour which fails to nurture me or others. I have truly realised that *We reap what we sow* ...

(From 'Sayings And Clichés', essay in
Reality and Illusion & Other Essays)

250 **Oneness with the eternal**

You are my dreams,
My heart's assistance,
My two extremes,
My soul existence;
 For this is true
 And e'er will be:
If you're not you,
Then I'm not me.

(From 'Love Has No End', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

251 **Being poisoned by false messages**

The waters of the nearby stream had always given him life –
The only life he had ever known,
And he drank freely each day,
Deriving, therefrom, sustenance and nurturing –
Or so he ardently believed,
As had numerous generations before him.
But, over many centuries, and – scarcely perceived –
Foreign elements, either by mischance or malice,
Mingled surreptitiously with the original, undefiled flow,
And the water had become seriously tainted,
The constant turmoil in its random course
Never permitting the impurities
To sink harmlessly to the bottom.

(From 'The Water Of Life', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

252 **Taking my own counsel**

One of my favourite quotations comes from a wonderful American woman, Helen Keller, who was the first deaf-blind person to obtain a university degree. She said, *When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.*

Over the years, I have offered the simple philosophy enshrined in this quotation to a good number of friends who were stuck in their lives. This morning (March 2016) a little voice in my head whispered, 'Why don't you take your own counsel?'

My life is fundamentally a miracle, but there are also considerable difficulties. I have been trying a number of different remedies for some which haven't worked, yet am clinging tenaciously to one or two of the most recent ones. And I have been giving myself a hard time with questions like: 'What's wrong with me that these things don't work?' Answer? There is nothing wrong; they just don't work for me. That's all.

It's time to close the door firmly on them. I won't see a new door opening until I have done so.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

253 **Never too late to learn to be a child!**

The article you sent me on play as a religious activity is interesting, the more so because the author felt it necessary to justify his topic at the start. The God I know has always loved us to play, but somehow that message got mislaid for a long time, and we didn't hear it. My own life has been no exception, but I am learning to play all over again; at heart I'm just a child, and it's never too late to learn to be a child!

(From a letter, June 2004)

254 **More about teaching**

Approximately 75 per cent of the content of this course is original material developed by me. I have no idea how much time has gone into the development of the subject overall, but I did keep a time log on the core seminar of the course, 'Getting The Balance Right'. This seminar takes twelve hours to teach and, to date, has taken over three thousand hours to develop. It includes a copious student manual, separate, printed lecturer's manual, and nearly three hundred overhead projector acetates. I have also developed an extensive student manual to cover the other topics on the course. Effectively I am producing my own textbooks.

(From a report, March 1999)

255 **A fairy's first experience of sleeping**

'But tell me: how was your first experience of sleeping?'

She became serious. 'Er, I loved it.' I sensed a 'but' in her tone of voice.

'But?'

'But – and it's a big "but" – I had one of those dreams you were talking about and it was really scary.'

'Oh, you mean a nightmare?'

'What's a nocturnal horse got to do with it?'

I laughed. 'No, no, a nightmare is what we humans call a bad dream.'

(From 'In The Swim', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

256 **What's it all for?**

In later life, one can tend to look back and wonder what it was all about. What was all the fuss and the effort for? Apart from paying the bills, what did my working life achieve? I was fortunate to have had a career where I could make a difference. But even if I had work which was mundane and seemed to add little to life, it would still have been intrinsically worth doing. Work well done dignifies a person, no matter how basic the work may be. I saw a quotation some years ago which really appealed to me: *There is no such thing as menial work, only menial attitudes.* Thinking about all this recently, the following reflection came to mind: we have to do what we have to do while we have to do it. And if we can enjoy the process, so very much the better.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

257 **Wide-eyed silence**

The number of topics on which my views continually grow, expand and change – and on which it is, therefore, inappropriate to express a fixed opinion – is increasing. Indeed, for this reason, where I do have an opinion for the time being I now mostly choose not to express it. I am enjoying the process of watching my horizons expand and keeping my mouth shut! My pen, however, continues to function on a regular basis, but a considerable proportion of what it produces is for my eyes only, more of it at most for a small number of friends.

It has long been my perception, based on my western conditioning, that a widely used measure of the informed and educated man or woman in our society is the ability to hold and express opinions on all matters of substance and many minor ones as well. In complete contrast to this, I now find such a view prescriptive and constricting, and that the freedom not to hold or express fixed opinions – or, more appropriately, not to feel obliged to hold or express them – is absolutely wonderful.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

258 **Not good at small talk**

I know from experience that it is of fundamental importance to my well-being to observe the precept 'live and let live'. Therefore, let me be clear on one point: I am in no way judging anybody who gets a buzz out of meaningless, party small talk. Indeed, I will go further: I fully accept that to be serious all the time is unbalanced, and the light, bright and trivial may well be a pleasant break from the tedium of earnestness for many people. But, whatever the arguments in its favour, I have a marked distaste for such shallow prattle. I find my own relief from excessive pensiveness in other ways, many of them unconventional. But then, although generally thought of as a conformist, I have always been something of a maverick.

(From 'The Time Traveller', story in *In My Write Mind*)

259 **A companion**

A Light In The Dark comprises a collection of verses from the Bible (principally the Psalms, many of which, to me, are universal in their wisdom and beauty), sacred texts from other religious traditions, quotations from a variety of other sources and items from my own writing. The extracts chosen represent a very personal selection that help to sustain me on my journey through life. My personal copy also includes morning and evening reflections.

When I have to go away from home (even if only down town to read and reflect in a coffee shop!), I like to travel light and all the original source books would be bulky additions to the usual paraphernalia I bring with me on such excursions. The purpose of producing this little volume, therefore, is to provide me with a compact travelling companion.

[I am working on the second edition, which will have a somewhat different emphasis and format, and it will be subtitled, *A Personal Treasury*.]

(From the introduction to *A Light In The Dark*)

260 **Language is finite**

The most intimate moments with [the Divine] are far too precious to share with anybody; and even if I wished to do so, it would be impossible, for they cannot be expressed in finite words, even though there are said to be between six hundred thousand and seven hundred and fifty thousand of them in English alone, plus the vocabularies of the other languages I can speak. This is not so difficult to understand. If I try to describe the fullness of the beauty of swans in flight low over the water or the wonder of a field of myriad sunflowers all facing up to the sun to somebody who has never seen them, I will not succeed. I may generate brilliant similes and sublime metaphors, paint the most innovative word pictures, but I will not succeed. At best I will create a mere shadow of the reality. They must see these sights themselves to know fully what I mean.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

261 **A valiant if shaky attempt to cast off
a spell of the blues!**

The blues have pitched it much too strong.
They've been around for far too long;
I fear they'll just go on and on,
And on and on and on and on,
And on and on and on ...
But, suddenly, there's something wrong:
My vast supply of 'ons' has gone.
I cannot, hence, this wail prolong.
Perhaps, when all is said and done,
The ending to this marathon –
The very dream I dwell upon –
Is just around the corner.

In that case, then, I'd best hang on,
And on and on and on and on,
And on and on and on ...

(‘Hang On’, poem in *Hang On!*)

262 **We all need a shepherd**

Now, I have no doubt that sheep, relative to one another, have varying degrees of intelligence, and that they experience the same sort of inferiority complex I do when confronted (only on very rare occasions, mind you!) with a superior intellect. One can imagine, for instance, Curly having a number of conversations with his grazing partner, Fluffy, and concluding glumly – having listened to the latter’s articulate discourses on various subjects of interest to the sheep fraternity – that said Fluffy must be a member of Sheep Mensa while he himself has to muddle along with considerably fewer brain cells.

Fascinating, don’t you think? Gives one an intriguingly new perspective on these harmless quadrupeds, armed with which my reader will probably never look at sheep in quite the same way again. But the point I want to emphasise is this: relative to the shepherd, sheep are absolutely stupid.

(From ‘Shepherd And Sheep’, fable in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

263 **Real life? No thanks!**

To this very day, I don’t like reading a story or novel or watching a movie unless the ending could be substituted with the traditional ‘and they all lived happily ever after’. Most of the modern stuff (indeed the ancient stuff as well) about ‘real life’ leaves me as cold as ice. I’ve got enough of that in my own experience of the human condition, and see more than enough of it in the world around me, without burdening my mind and heart with somebody else’s creative misery.

(From a letter, May 2004)

264 **Ban music in coffee shops**

‘Now look here, Lucille, it’s not like you to be so argumentative over something so petty. Anybody in their right mind can see that coffee shops are primarily talking shops and piped music is as appropriate to talking shops as a pickaxe is to a neurosurgeon performing a delicate brain operation ...’

(From ‘Talking Shop’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

265 **Yearning and seeking**

In the moment when I *know* that I am loved unconditionally, I also *know* that I am a person of great worth. If I come to know that I am loved in this way and beyond measure by the All-That-Is, how can I not love myself?

That moment came when I was fifty-two years of age, and I now *know* both of these states of being – that is, knowing I am loved like this and knowing that I am a person of great worth – are, in reality, two aspects of the same phenomenon, two sides of the same coin. In this light, I can truly say that I now possess one of the most precious jewels in creation. I had nothing to do with it save to yearn for it. Therefore, it is pure gift and my heart is filled with gratitude ... Yearning, it seems, is way more powerful than seeking.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

266 **‘Proving’ the non-existence of God**

It is amazing how easy it is – if one is so inclined – to ‘prove’ the non-existence of God by the use of intellectual debate drawing on the study of certain schools of philosophy, logic and scientific evidence. Even the most learned and convincing of these expressions, however, are the product of the intellect, and the intellect, no matter how far evolved, is most decidedly finite. To use intellectual argument and debate as the arbiter of God’s existence makes the appointment of a mentally retarded chimpanzee as Secretary General of the United Nations seem like an enlightened decision.

Knowledge of God comes from a realm far beyond the intellect which, I imagine, is why those who have not experienced this realm, hence this knowledge, deny its existence. Furthermore, those who exclusively pursue the intellectual route will often deride any experience outside what they would term ‘reality’. However, it doesn’t take a very highly developed intellect to perceive that what the world believes to be reality is often but illusion. Albert Einstein once observed: *Reality is merely an illusion albeit a very persistent one.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

267 **Me and my sense of humour**

‘Oh come, where’s your sense of humour this evening?’

‘Now that you mention it: when I eventually got to the checkout, I put a jumbo pack of toilet paper on the desk, leaned over, looked at the girl intently and said, “I’m buying this for my wife’s birthday. Do you think she’ll like it?”’

‘How did she react?’

‘For about five seconds she looked at me as if I was an alien from another planet, then, once she caught the twinkle in my eye, burst into laughter.’

‘And you?’

‘I responded in kind. The two of us giggled like two kids, much to the annoyance of some of the people behind me in the queue, and to the merriment of the rest.’

(From ‘In With A Chance’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

268 **What is poetry?**

Well, what is poetry? A considerable number of moons ago, it would not have been necessary to ask such a question. If it didn’t rhyme and follow a recognised metrical pattern, it would not have been deemed worthy of the appellation. Now, however, with the virtually universal acceptance of free verse, or *vers libre*, anything goes, and one has rather more difficulty in determining precisely what the stuff is. One of my favourite authors, P.G. Wodehouse, in his customary humorous vein, has this to say: *Who can say where this thing will end? ‘Vers libre’ is within the reach of all. A sleeping nation has awakened to the realisation that there is money to be made out of chopping its prose into bits.*

(From ‘What Is Poetry?’, essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

269 **Materialism versus spirituality**

The worldly quest is based on wants that are never satisfied. Spirituality, on the other hand, is based on needs that are always met, as long as I do not demand that they be met according to my specification.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

270 **True love means ...**

If I love you and you love me,
We must ... but heavens, no!
True love does not mean holding on;
True love means letting go.

(From 'True Love Means ...', poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

271 **For a good friend awaiting a heart transplant**

On Renvyle's wave-washed, shingled strand,
I find a heart of stone,
Marble pure, white, cold as ice,
Midst common rocks, alone.

No body heat, no rhythmic beat,
No veins to irrigate;
No human need, no cause to bleed,
No frame to animate.

Scarce high ideal, unfit to feel,
Its shape but random chance,
Creation's quirk, not formed to work,
Nor fashioned for man's dance.

Cold stone, reveal you once were real,
Your pulsing role complete,
Now petrified by time and tide
That robbed your will to beat.

Oh, lifeless heart clasped in my hand,
Forsake this barren shore;
Become again a heart of flesh,
And give him life once more.

(‘Heart To Heart’, poem in *One By One*)

272 **Humility**

Lucille said it all: ‘Humility, you know, is one of those paradoxical qualities; the more of it you think you have, the less you possess.’

(From ‘Mission Possible’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

273 **Silence can be golden**

A friend of mine, a ‘mature’ adult, was always getting into squabbles with those around him, particularly his family and, to a lesser extent, with work colleagues, arguing over inconsequential trivialities, being one of those individuals who is ‘always right’. He was sharing this one day with a wise, older friend, who simply offered this simple suggestion: ‘Say nothing and keep saying it!’ Thankfully, he saw the good sense in this and, over a relatively short period of time, he implemented the advice and saw wonderful transformations take place in all his relationships.

Likewise, over the past twenty years or so, I am amazed to find, in my own life, not alone how much disturbance I can avoid but how much I can actually achieve by keeping my big mouth shut. I don’t mean the ‘cold shoulder’ type of silence; that is childish and counterproductive. I mean simply saying nothing when it will make matters worse or, at least, will add no value to the situation.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

274 **A healthy dependency**

When I think I am in control of my life, particularly my emotional life, that’s when I get into real trouble. I ask for help each morning, and give thanks each night to the God of my perception. The more I kick against the idea of a higher power, the more my life becomes unmanageable. The more I come to trust this higher power and entrust my life to him, the freer I become – a healthy dependency. These last two words sound like a paradox, but they are not. If I come to accept the need for a higher power in my life but I just can’t believe, I can ‘act as if’ I believe. The belief will follow the action after a while.

If, however, the ‘There is no God’ belief runs very deep with you or you have some belief but don’t want to be bothered or don’t believe that any God can help you, please see the essay ‘Memo From A Former Atheist’ in the Appendix (page 651).

(From *Living With The Blues*)

275 **First experience of transatlantic culture**

Just after my arrival in the New World on my very first visit, I was plodding along a street in the Large Fruit on a hot, sultry, humid day, lugging my belongings to my destination, when an urgent thirst took possession of me, and I repaired, without further ado, to the nearest hostelry.

I propped my posterior on a convenient stool, my elbows on the counter, supporting my jet-lagged head with one hand and wiping the bedewed brow with the other, while my eyes grew accustomed to the dimly lit interior of the establishment.

What gradually came into focus behind the counter filled me with apprehension about ordering a restorative, for the bartender (that's what they call barmen over there), who bore a striking resemblance to a bad-tempered, oversized warthog with severe acne, was now glowering at me over his shoulder, from halfway down the bar.

The parched throat won the day, however, and, clearing my throat meaningfully, I made ready for speech: 'Er, I say; excuse me, bartender, when you have a moment, and if it's not too much trouble, and if you'd be so kind, could I ever possibly have a beer please?'

'Wassa madder wid you, fella? D'ya wanna beer or don't ya?'

(From 'Keep It Simple', story in *In My Write Mind*)

276 **An alien visits a pub?**

Pretty dismal standard of construction when one comes to think of it, especially after hundreds of years of experience and evolution. Structures known as 'counters' in every hamlet, village, town and city seem unable to remain erect without the concerted support of an amazing variety of human beings, propped apparently at random but, obviously to the practised eye, in a carefully planned fashion at numerous points along the 'bar'. 'Bar', I should explain to the uninitiated, is the term commonly used by what appear, on first acquaintance, to be members of some strange, idol-worshipping cult.

(From 'Counter Productive', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

277 **That's love!**

Just as I was putting the finishing touches to *Beyond The Rainbow* (subtitled *Is there a God? What to teach our children?*), I had a big row with the God in question, during the course of which I said, and I really meant it, 'If you think I'm going to recommend a God like you to my children, grandchildren and others, you can think again!' Teresa of Ávila who, like me, loved him to bits, said on one occasion (and only one you'll be glad to hear!): *If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you've so few.* I know what she meant. And I resolved, if not to abandon the whole project, at least to deep freeze it and put it on an extremely long finger. A couple of hours later, I shared the episode with my daughter and we had a good laugh over it. A little while after, I heard the softest whisper on the wind: 'He'll get over it! I am taking care of him; he can't see that right now, even though he knows it in his heart of hearts. And, of course, I *know* that all is well and everything is going to be just fine.' If you can imagine a whisper being suffused with a loving and compassionate smile, that's the way it was. All is well it seems!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

278 **Elusive peace of mind**

'It's driving me cracked, Lucille! I'm like a cat on hot tin roof. I just can't stay still. Alas, this is no seldom occurrence. Being in a rush internally, despite any external appearance of being at ease, appears to be my unalterable *modus operandi*. Not by choice of course. It's as if some blasted inner voice (probably Fred, the bollocks) keeps goading me on to the next task or thought, never content with the current offering. And it's not the first time I have had occasion to write about this confounded personality trait. Yet, quite obviously, the "get it down on paper and give it a life of its own" strategy has failed to relieve the pressure.

'Shit anyway! Sorry; I didn't mean to use bad language, but it's so goddam frustrating, esteemed Muse.'

(From 'A Spot Of Psychology', story in *Life With Lucille*)

279 **An invitation**

Before I leave you to peruse the pieces on offer, I would like to draw your attention to some excellent counsel, to which I have referred in ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’, namely Socrates’ exhortation to follow the evidence wherever it leads. In my experience, the evidence of our feelings and the senses can often be unreliable, even misleading; the evidence provided by the intellect can be solid if carefully researched, but the human intellect is finite, hence its findings, no matter how impressive, are necessarily limited; the only trustworthy evidence is the evidence of the spirit. First, however, the realm of the spirit must be desired, then sought, then allowed time for us to learn to attune to its revealing, for it operates largely on a very different plane to our logic and language. But these are the precious insights – the transcendent awareness if you wish – that I have discerned on my path. I invite you to find yours.

(From the Introduction to *Beyond The Rainbow*)

280 **Actually, I don’t need reasons for producing my books!**

I have three reasons for producing a Millennium Edition of *Fawly Toorism*:

- ✧ Almost everybody seems to be doing something for the millennium, so why shouldn’t I?
- ✧ I took early retirement from the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology on 31st October 2000 and wanted to do something to mark that event.
- ✧ I can’t remember what the third reason is.

Of course the new millennium actually starts on 1st January 2001 – a fact which took the combined brainpower of my daughter and me about forty-five minutes to come to understand one evening. It can be seen, therefore, that I am not late celebrating the millennium; I’m early. So there!

(From the Preface to *Fawly Toorism – Millennium Edition*)

281 **Nature teaches a lesson**

With heart as heavy as a stone,
I walk the countryside alone
To seek much-needed solace.
I tread the way across the heath,
E'er conscious of the bog beneath,
And the heather newly growing,
The gorse and grass, the ferns and trees,
The whisper of a gentle breeze –
Connemara in the spring;
Across a stream and near a stone,
A daffodil blooming on its own,
No twin to keep it company.
In awe, I see its loveliness,
Its sallow, saffron comeliness,
That alone was worth the walking,
Grateful that, so far apart
From habitat, it lifts my heart,
And I wonder how it came there.
With no complaint of alienation,
It seems content with its vocation
To take its circumstance for granted,
And simply blossom where it's planted.

(‘Flower Power’, poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

282 **The ‘same’ Connemara**

I have mentioned elsewhere that I have been to my favourite place – Connemara in general and Máméan in particular – on countless occasions. It is reasonable to ask: do I not get bored going to the same place time after time? My experience, and I have heard it echoed by many other people, especially artists and photographers, is that I *never* go to the same Connemara twice. The light interacts with the landscape, and the mystical quality of the region interacts with my emotions and my spirit in such a way as to ensure that each visit is a unique experience. I feel blessed to have it on my doorstep.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

283 Lucille hits the nail on the head

'I don't normally like background music in coffee shops, unless it really is in the *background*. Here they are playing a bit of easy-going jazz at low decibels, and I don't normally much like jazz either, but, for whatever reason, I am actually quite enjoying it. Maybe it's the mood I'm in.'

'What mood are you in?' asked Lucille.

'I'm not sure. I'm physically tired, but don't feel like slowing down. Glad to be here, but wishing I were somewhere else; not wanting to go home, but wanting to be at home as well. Needing company, but longing for solitude. Glad to be writing, but wondering whether it's all just self-indulgence. Feeling up, feeling down ... I suppose it's a sort of mixed bag of emotions. Not exactly bad, sad, mad, glad, all at the same time, but you get the idea.'

'In other words, you're spiritually restless.'

I should be used to Lucille's mind-boggling ability to diagnose my various vicissitudes with spectacular accuracy, but it still takes me by surprise every time.

'Er ... yes, I suppose you might say that. What do you reckon it's all about, precious Muse? It has me completely baffled.'

(From 'Attaboy!', story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

284 Five favourite words

I was thinking today (July 2015) that three of my favourite words in the English language have long been 'mystical', 'essence' and 'feminine'. I like 'mystical' both for its sound and its meaning. As long as thirty years ago, I began to describe the core of my being as the 'indestructible essence', so that 'essence' has come to mean the very substance of who I am – and of everybody else's 'who I am' also, of course. Of 'feminine', I said this in the essay 'Femininity, Modesty and More*': ... *in conceiving the wondrous concept of femininity in its totality, God reached the pinnacle of his divine, creative genius in my view.*

The two other words of which I am very fond are 'gentle' and 'sacred'.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* In the collection *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn.

285 **Willingness to be there for someone**

Thank you so much for thinking of me in relation to a possible meeting with your friend. I think you know me well enough to understand that it is always my heart to be there for whomever I can, but that this has – both for their sake and mine – to be within my very definite limitations and I have given careful thought to your request.

I have a question: has he expressed a desire to meet with somebody with whom he can empathise and share whatever he needs to share in absolute confidence? If he hasn't as yet, you will know how to determine with sensitivity whether he does in fact desire this.

I am always at pains to emphasise that I have no advice to give. If God has given me any gifts at all, it is to share my own journey with others and to be willing to listen attentively to theirs. If they can draw something useful from my story, I am glad, and I will certainly learn from them. At best, I may make gentle suggestions now and again, if that seems appropriate. The great thing about suggestions is that is all they are; if they don't suit the person to whom I am offering them and they don't wish to act on them, there is no harm done for I have given no advice. Likewise, I am neither a counsellor nor a spiritual director. My very beautiful spirituality is the most important aspect of my life, but each person is unique, and at best I may accompany somebody on their journey. In short, I have no mission to preach, teach, convince or evangelise – only to share.

If your friend feels he might be comfortable with all that, I would be very happy and privileged to meet him.

(From a letter, September 2016)

286 **Testing your biblical knowledge!**

I noticed that not all the places at the wedding breakfast in the rooftop restaurant, were filled with invited guests so I decided, with biblical inspiration, to go out into the highways and byways and so forth – well, you probably know the story.

(From 'Space Travel', story in *In My Write Mind*)

287 **What's in a title (*Beyond The Rainbow*)**

A word about the title. A rainbow is beautiful, but it is always accompanied by rain – a mixed blessing one might say. So, it can be a useful analogy for our experience of the human condition. A rainbow's beauty, however, is at best insubstantial and ephemeral, in some ways just an illusion, and both science and legend tell us that we can never find the rainbow's end. To discover what is truly beautiful, real and permanent, therefore, we need to look *beyond* the rainbow.

(From the Introduction to *Beyond The Rainbow*)

288 **On being a loner**

When the world describes somebody as a loner it is almost always, in my experience, a criticism. To say somebody is gregarious, on the other hand, would normally be taken as a compliment.

Consider the following statement: 'Oh Mary! She's just wonderful, always fun to be around, good company, a great partygoer. John? Ah well, he's a loner, you know.' What is the imaginary speaker in this statement saying? Effectively, that John doesn't 'fit in'.

I find, however, that, far from being a character defect, being a 'loner' is a gift. I don't like being alone all the time – humanly speaking – but I certainly like my space and plenty of it ...

There is another way of looking at these two states, loner and gregarious. Consider the following statement: 'Oh Mary! She's got problems; she always has to have company to feel fulfilled; her validation comes from others and she goes to endless lengths not to be alone. John? Now there's a balanced guy, quite happy in his own company, you know, and his validation comes from genuine self-endorsement.'

Note that being a loner, in the wholesome sense, has nothing to do with isolation. Generally, a loner will enjoy the company of others, but is quite fulfilled in his/her own company and seeks it often.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

289 **Seeing things differently**

When he grew up, as a result of schooling, religious formation and social conditioning, he was to be, for the most part, a conformist to the outer world but, as the years went by, he realised that he did not think like other people in so many ways. And it was only much later, with hindsight, he recalled that by the time he was six, he had a sense, albeit an incomplete one, that while he was like other children in all the usual ways – fun-loving, curious, mercurial and mischievous – there was something about the way in which he viewed the world around him that was different to his youthful companions.

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

290 **I always call to Kilmilkin Church**

I've never liked the saccharine statue
That styles you like a starlet with a rose
In a nun's habit;
But I love the icon with the photo
Of the true and real Thérèse.
So every time I pass,
I come in to say hello,
Light a tiny flame or two,
Remind you that I love you,
And ask for your protection
From everything that ails me.

(From 'Persistence', poem in *The Power Of Light*)

291 **Deserving or not deserving?**

Deserving or not deserving has got absolutely nothing to do with the way God treats me. His action in my life is guided solely by infinite, steadfast, unconditional love. Whether I deserve it or not is totally irrelevant. If the degree to which I deserved something guided God, then his love would not be unconditional.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

292 **A sacred place**

People travel across continents to visit the rugged but beautiful region of Connemara, which is less than thirty minutes' drive from my home; and in an hour I can be in the heart of the mountains. For years, I never went out there, giving myself excuses like, 'The kids would be bored', despite the fact that my 'kids' were now of an age where they would appreciate it.

I worked as a lecturer in the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology for a long time. One fine April day, over twenty years ago, my schedule for the afternoon was cancelled, so I decided I would occupy the time by starting the work of setting the summer examinations. Out of the blue, a little voice inside my head said, 'No, I won't; I'll head for Connemara.' When I got there, I immediately saw what I had been missing all this time. On that first excursion, I didn't discover Máméan (I had never heard of it), but saw the signpost for it, and drove three kilometres further on the narrow road along the foot of the Maumturk Mountains to a place called Illion West, and climbed up the mountainside there, following a stream toward its source. It is a lovely spot and also has a special place in my heart.

On the next visit, I climbed up to Máméan for the first time and immediately fell in love with it. For reasons which I have covered elsewhere in my writings, some of them personal, this shrine on a mountain pass has become the most sacred place on Earth to me.

(From the Introduction to *Máméan – A Sacred Place*)

293 **Fame? No thanks**

Reflecting on this minimal exposure – but exposure nevertheless – I discovered that being published didn't make me one bit happier. So I didn't pursue it further. Anyway, I'm the shy, retiring type and since I have no doubt that global sales of my work, if published, might top fifty or so copies I don't think I could stand all the fame!

(From a letter, December 2000)

294 **Harmonising the spiritual and the temporal**

The spiritual operates mostly, though by no means exclusively, in a realm that is extraterrestrial – or in another dimension if you wish. Harmonising it with the temporal, in such a way that the two live in peaceful co-existence has proved to be extremely difficult. Maybe they are not meant to harmonise, not completely at any rate, so that discontent with the temporal will render all the more wondrous the extraterrestrial dimension when we attain it. That is why I have written several times that, in my life, it is like living in two worlds.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

295 **When I need to change**

I may see the need to make changes in my life but be reluctant to make these changes. The key, the starting point, is to be *willing*. Even if I can't do that, I can be willing to become willing to make the changes. Then, I start with something small, and when I see the benefit of the change, move on to bigger changes.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

296 **Failure?**

One of the most helpful things I have heard on my journey through life is: *There is no failure except the failure to try*. We live, in our times, with a pervasive 'cult of success', which drives us to achieve goals and win at competitive endeavours. This leaves those who don't achieve and win feeling like dropouts if they have swallowed the achieve-and-win philosophy whole. It is much healthier for me to see that, as long as I do my best to undertake the necessary footwork, even if I do not achieve or win, there is *no* failure. To put it another way: I give myself credit for the effort, regardless of the outcome.

On a light-hearted note, the following inscription will be on my gravestone: *If God loves a trier, he sure loves me!* By heaven, have I tried!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

297 **A bit of fun with one of my privately produced books – 1**

Read what the press didn't say about *Grin And Bear It!*:

'Ken's writing is a breath of fresh air; dynamic, romantic, reflective and amusing.'

'He draws you into the atmosphere of each poem almost from the first line.'

'Brilliant; he gives an offbeat slant to the most mundane subjects.'

'One of the finest writers of our time.'

I'll let you know if they ever do say anything like that. As a matter of fact, I'll shout it from the rooftops!

(From the back cover of *Grin And Bear It!*)

298 **A bit of fun with one of my privately produced books – 2**

Homage To A Damp Squib gets rave reviews:

'Wonderful, terrific, refreshing ...'

'You're going to be hearing a lot more of this writer. He's a word to be read and a voice to be heard.'

'Pure, unadulterated genius; what more need one say?'

'Ken O'Sullivan is a poet for the twenty-first century, indeed a writer for all seasons.'

Pardon? Oh, you want to know who wrote these reviews? Well, to tell the truth, I did. And, before you say a word, it's absolute nonsense to state that self-praise is no praise. I am currently writing an essay about the wonderfully positive and therapeutic effects of self-praise which will feature in my next book. Okay, okay, the comments are just a teeny-weeny bit over the top, I grant you that, but don't spoil my fun!

(From the back cover of *Homage To A Damp Squib*)

299 **A bit of fun with one of my privately produced books – 3**

Save Us From The Well-meaning! Readers' comments:

'Save us from inept poets like Ken O'Sullivan, more like.'

'If you are looking for the very best in unadulterated drivel, here it is.'

'High-class crap. What a waste of paper.'

'Ken O'Sullivan ought to get sense and take up playing golf or something.'

'I'm sure his kindergarten teacher was very impressed when he showed her these poems.'

'How insulting,' I hear you gasp, rallying to my cause. 'Whoever was it that said such dreadful things?' I did. In my previous two collections I went a bit over the top in the other direction, so I thought I'd balance things up in this one. The soul of fairness, that's me!

Actually, the poems aren't that bad.

(From the back cover of *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

300 **A bit of fun with one of my privately produced books – 4**

Hang On! gets rave reviews!

That is to say, it should get rave reviews, but seeing that I haven't submitted it to any critics to read it and have no intention of so doing, it's not likely to get any reviews – rave or crap – is it?

Which leaves me at a bit of a loss what to put on the back cover. In my last three volumes, I indulged in both over-the-top praise and abject insults – all written by me just for the fun of it, and I wanted to be a bit innovative for this little tome. But I can't think of a word to say.

Come to think of it, that's pretty innovative isn't it? What books have you ever read where the back covers – if they contained anything at all – announced that the writer or critics or publisher couldn't think of a word to say?

I leave you with the thought, then, that this back cover may well go down in history. The poems aren't bad either.

(From the back cover of *Hang On!*)

301 **A bit of fun with one of my privately produced books – 5**

No Rest For The Wicked

Yet another runaway, poetic success from the master of privately produced books. First print run: two copies!

(From the back cover of *No Rest For The Wicked*)

302 **Freedom of spirit**

'Have you ever seen an eagle in flight, David?'

'Only on television.'

'Amazing creatures, eagles. If ever you are in a region of the world where these wonderful creatures are to be seen in the wild, find somebody who knows the territory well and ask them to bring you out into the wilderness to observe them. They are among the most powerful birds in the air and their mighty wings could bring them anywhere they wish to go. But do you know how they attain the dizzy heights at which they have been found?'

'No.'

'They just fly gently across the sky until they find a rising current of warm air, a thermal as it is known, then they simply open their wings and let the warm air bear them upwards. When one thermal runs out, they drift across to another and go even higher. A Rüppell's Griffon, a member of the eagle family, has been recorded at thirty-seven thousand feet.'

'That's impossible. There's hardly any air at that height.'

'Nevertheless, it is a verifiable fact. Potent symbol, is it not?'

'Yes it is but, much and all as I am loath to point out the obvious to one of your undoubted perceptiveness, I regret to say that I cannot fly!' said David, laughing.

'You can in spirit.'

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

303 **What is recovery?**

'Recovery' is a word one hears frequently in relation to getting beyond childhood or subsequent traumas, untimely bereavements, bullying, poor self-esteem, abandonment, co-dependency, loneliness, addictions of one kind or another, and more. I sometimes wonder if there is anybody on the planet who is not recovering from *something*. But if we get beyond one or more of these conditions, where is it that we get to? There are several possible answers to this question: finding peace of mind, feeling comfortable in one's own skin, being 'normal' and happy, and so on. However, it is my belief that all these are aspects of the destination we reach when we embark on a journey toward wholesome self-love. This is actually quite logical. The many people with whom I have spoken over the years who identified their need to recover, all, initially, had a self-image ranging from low self-worth at best, to utter self-loathing at worst. To go in the opposite direction, then, with help if necessary, and find the self-love of which I speak (which has nothing to do with selfishness) is the only viable option. Ultimately, that is what recovery is, and it is the most worthwhile journey we will ever undertake. For ourselves, of course, but those around us will benefit greatly also. When we love ourselves in a holistic way, not only are we more fulfilled and grounded in our own beings, but we are in a much better position to reach out to others from and with that love. It seems to me that most of the major religions and secular philosophies affirm this ageless truth in one way or another.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

304 **Hindsight**

What appeared, at the time, to be some of the greatest disasters in my life turned out to be the catalysts of the most sublime blessings. Of course, I couldn't see all that at the time; it is only with the benefit of hindsight. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said: *Life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forwards*. I sure know what he means!

(From a letter, June 2004)

305 **The world's most important job**

The thought occurs that, of all the titles awarded by many countries throughout the world for the accomplishment of great deeds, the greatest title of all is acquired rather than awarded: 'Parent.' No medals please, just affirmation and support for the love of the couple who came together in love, who wish to remain together in love but are often deflected, driven apart by pitiless, albeit well-meaning publications, who, for monetary gain, promote peer pressures, an expression often thought to apply only to our children but, let us be honest, equally to us: the points system, the demand for a 'good job' for them, of course a good marriage and a home with the right address; all of which demands of us untrained parents that we become instantaneously nurturer, doctor, nurse, psychologist, educator, arbitrator, financier, spiritual adviser, home-provider, clothier, chef, and maintenance expert to a home that seems to deteriorate twice as fast as normal under the pressure of a growing family. And we do it all with love – most of the time!

(From 'All For Love', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

306 **Soulmate!**

'There, there, Jasmine. Don't see it that way. It's early days yet. Anything could happen in the months to come. It'll all be all right. You'll see.'

She wasn't to be consoled.

'Oh shit!' she said.

I gasped and looked at her disbelievingly. 'I didn't know fairies swore.'

'Normally they bloody well don't. But you've just met one who does!'

I reflected quietly, for a few moments, on our first major mission together, as she put it, then smiled contentedly to myself.

'This delightful little fairy and I are going to get along fine,' I murmured. 'Just fine.'

(From 'Mission Improbable', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

307 **Not tonight Josephine!**

‘Don’t know why I bothered.’

‘Bothered about what, if I may ask?’ said Lucille, a bit morosely, I thought.

‘Switching on the computer, revered Muse. Can’t imagine why I did it. I haven’t the slightest inclination to write tonight, not even the minutest shred thereof.’

‘Habit probably,’ she went on, equally morosely. ‘You are so accustomed to getting those magic microchips to do your daily bidding, that you switched the machine on automatically.’

‘Probably; but not tonight, Josephine, or Lucille rather. I think I’ll just switch it off again, unless of course you want to do a bit of inspiring.’

‘No; I’m really sorry, but I haven’t the slightest inclination to inspire tonight, not even the minutest shred thereof.’

‘Hmm ... I see what you mean. It’s a pretty bad sign when *you* copy *my* dialogue. Looks like it’s a creative no-no, then.’

(From ‘Why Bother?’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

308 **I think I’m stuck with Fred!**

‘The fact of the matter is that this me and you stuff is, in truth, just a pseudo-schizophrenic vehicle I use to accentuate the sort of garbage that goes on inside my head and is a useful device to illustrate same to the esteemed reader. In reality this “we” of which I often speak are but one, and there is only me. You don’t exist.’

I thought I had won the day, but Fred had an ace card up his sleeve.

‘Okay! Have it your way. But you’ll be sorry. Secretly you absolutely delight in the artificial notion of being a split personality, if for no better reason than it has enabled you to write over a hundred stories about our chats, and there is little that gives you more nurturing and enjoyment than writing. Jettison what you ungratefully call “the me and you stuff” and you’ll be reduced to concocting silly limericks and the like.’

(From ‘Status Quo’, story in *Life With Fred*)

309 **It's never too late ...**

And oh, can I relate to that negative voice which often tells me that all the things I want to do are just not possible, and why don't I just accept that I'm past it and settle down to inevitable decay! I think I shared this with you before, but it bears repeating at this point. Mary Wesley, a highly successful novelist, didn't have her first novel published until she was seventy. Wait till you hear the rest of the story: she wrote a bestseller every year for the next twenty years, some of them made into television mini-series. I also love what the nineteenth-century novelist George Elliot said, namely that we are never too old to become the person we have always wanted to be. Amen to that!

(From a letter, December 2012)

310 **Giving and receiving**

I have come to the realisation that, for me, unconditional giving is part of a precious circle which is not complete until the giving is complimented by an ability on my part to receive unconditionally. But what does 'unconditional receiving' mean? It means that I put no conditions – whether known or unknown to the giver – on the receiving of a gift. Such a condition could, for instance, be to imply to a friend who wishes to give me the gift of their presence over a chat and a cup of coffee, that I am generously fitting them into my busy schedule. More importantly I make no judgement of the quality or nature of the gift whether a simple wild flower or a very expensive item, no judgement as to whether I want, need or like it. My attitude is that if somebody thinks me worthy to receive a gift from them, then I accept it with gratitude and joy. When I do this, I can see beauty and wonder in almost everything I receive. When I don't, I fail to complete the circle and am not enriched by the gift, not nurtured by the giver, nor they by me. Such a loss. Most importantly, unconditional receiving means that I do not give in to any temptation to believe that I must give something in return.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

311 **Damp squib**

Did you ever speculate
What it would be like,
Cycling half way round the world
On a penny farthing bike?
Or did you ever wonder
How 'twould be to play a song
On an out-of-tune piano
Five miles outside Hong Kong?
Or did you e'er consider
That a smoker's rasping wheeze
Takes just a small bit longer
Than an elephantine sneeze?
 You didn't?
 Oh well!
 That's the end of that, then,
 Isn't it?

(‘Damp Squib’, poem in *One By One*)

312 **Eternal reward?**

It is remarkable how often spiritual writers, theologians, the saints, hence most people with a religious way of being, refer to the ‘eternal reward’ which awaits us in heaven after enduring the trials and tribulations of this life. It is such a common way of seeing things, that I have often wondered if anybody stops to consider its implications. The first definition of the word in the *Oxford American Dictionary* is: ‘A thing given in recognition of service, effort, or achievement.’ Put simply, it is something given to us *if* we attain a goal or achieve some objective. ‘If’ is the strongest conditional word in the English language. Thus, I will do such-and-such for you *if* ... Okay, here’s the nub of the issue: is God’s love unconditional or is it not? ‘Unconditional’ is one of those absolute words which cannot be qualified in any way. It is no more possible to be rather unconditional than it is to be a small bit dead or a little bit pregnant!

So is eternal happiness given to us unconditionally, or is it something we have to struggle to earn during this life? Perhaps there is another way of interpreting it. For reasons we don't fully understand, life is a struggle for everybody on the planet. The circumstances of the struggle and the degree to which each individual struggles vary, but that is all. I firmly believe, from deep personal experience, hence firm conviction, that God understands our struggles intimately, has infinite compassion as well as infinite love for us, but knows that, when our journey here is completed, when we are in what I have called 'The fullness of forever', all previous suffering will pass away, and it will feel as if we are being rewarded far beyond anything we could ever have earned with our own meagre efforts here. In other words, regardless of what went on in our earthly life, *we receive a reward without condition.*

Let me end on a light note. I have searched but cannot find the source of a quotation I heard many years ago. It may have been Oscar Wilde, but I cannot be sure. If any of my readers can enlighten me, I would be grateful. It went something like this: *We don't get what we deserve – and for most of us, it's just as well.* Now, there's a thought!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

313 **Feeling very low**

I'm in the clutches of a dream
Wherein confusion reigns supreme;
No clarity, no even keel,
No certainty of how I feel;
No sunshine to dispel the mist,
And let me keep a lover's tryst
With 'Peace of Mind' – that beauteous bride –
And stem confusion's flowing tide.
But dreams must end as tides must ebb;
Yet fate now weaves a tangled web –
The warp and weft of cruel delusion:
The dream's but truth, not night's illusion.

(*'Illusion'*, poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

314 **I don't like bad language, but ...**

How to handle swear words,
I mean in what proportion
When reproduced on paper?
I prefer refinement
And everything like roses,
But I am only human
And nobody is perfect;
And life is e'er a mixture
Of the proper and profane.
So to be a true reflection
Of the apt and the authentic,
My desultory verses
Must include a share of curses.
But how to strike a balance?
Of course, of course, a survey
On a sample of one – me.
A tally of my word use
For a time span hence ensues ...
It seems I use expletives
Barely once in seven thousand,
And since this poem comprises
But a fraction of that number,
It scarce would be appropriate
In this instance to say 'fuck'.
So I won't.

(‘In Proportion’, poem in *Voice Of The Man-child*)

315 **Housecleaning**

I do a simple little meditation where I visualise Love suffusing my entire body, and think of it as healing, repairing, restoring, renewing, resetting whatever is in need of those actions within me. Then I visualise it going out to my family and the many others for whom I pray, and doing the same thing. I feel that this quintet of words covers pretty much everything that is needed to tidy up my life and get back on an even keel.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

316 **Perhaps I'm odd**

'What an appalling display of double standards!' he said caustically. 'You frequently lambaste literary criticism, literary critics, poetic convention, intellectual arrogance and other forms of humbug. Yet are you not, in so doing, yourself indulging in the very activity for which you profess such profound distaste – criticism?'

'The only thing I criticise,' I answered, 'is criticism itself, which, in matters literary, is the only thing which it is valid to criticise.'

'There are vast cohorts of literati out there who would disagree vehemently with you.'

'Probably because they are making so much money out of it. What's more to the point is that there are even vaster cohorts of writers out there who would agree wholeheartedly with me!'

'We shall just have to agree to differ, I suppose.'

'Good idea!'

'Though I have to say that I find your stance very odd.'

'Long may it be so,' I said.

(From 'Perhaps I'm Odd!', story in *When The Bug Bites*)

317 **Where the action is?**

Perhaps the desire to be where it's all happening and have fun is more pervasive in the younger generation, but it is certainly not confined to young people; we are social beings regardless of age. As time goes by, however, instead of wanting to be where the action is, I am increasingly realising that what I need is to be found where the action isn't – on a mountain in Connemara, in a forest in the wilderness, on an unfrequented lakeshore or simply sitting quietly at a laptop keyboard with a few ideas in my head. But most of all, I find what I truly need in the sanctuary of my spirit where no other can enter, but where I find riches beyond measure. That's where the real action is.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

318 **Freedom**

‘You know, Lucille, it has often struck me that humility gets a very bad press in our society. Quite understandably of course. Humility is the “virtue” that is perceived as requiring us to lie down on the floor, have people walk all over us like a door mat, then turn the other cheek for more of the same, and come up smiling. And what self-respecting modern man or woman wants to do that? We live in an age of emancipation where the right of the individual to pursue his or her chosen desires is considered sacrosanct, material success and personal prestige the ultimate prizes. That’s freedom, we are told.

‘You know the sort of thing: latitude to climb to a senior executive post with a large corporation which requires that we meet “challenging” goals and objectives, behave in a certain way, dress in a certain way and acquire the trappings of our peers. I mean you can’t collect important customers at the airport in a beat-up Mini, and then entertain them to dinner at Joe’s fish and chip shop, can you? Then there’s the large house on the large site with the right address, boasting a suitably sizeable mortgage which requires that meeting the aforesaid goals and targets inevitably burns us out (the consolation being that it’s fashionable to be burnt out nowadays). We will need constant recognition for our achievements and continual affirmation from our circle of acquaintance, and we will say “yes” when we want to say “no” just to get people to like us – a sort of willing slavery. There will be frequent society parties, the insincerity of fair-weather friends, meaningless chatter, ballet and riding lessons for the kids, a Feng Shui consultant, regular cosmetic surgery, three holidays abroad per year, a weekend cottage on the coast, an affair or two, an ongoing supply of Valium, repossession of the large house on being made redundant, and a quadruple bypass operation.

‘And that’s freedom? Could have fooled me. As a matter of fact it did (fool me that is) for quite some time, until I realised – mostly as a result of pain, disillusionment and walking into stone walls at the end of cul-de-sacs – that not to need and, more importantly, not to want all these “things” is the real freedom.’

(From ‘Mission Possible’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

319 **The only lasting security**

‘It seems to my limited intelligence that the only measure of God’s love is the simple but unshakeable assurance in one’s heart that despite all the outward circumstances of life, good, bad or indifferent, one is loved with an infinite love beyond human understanding. The ultimate example is that wonderful person – the name escapes me for the moment – whose inspiring response to his experience of the horrors of Nazi concentration camps was: ‘Don’t wrestle, nestle.’ The inner assurance, my dear old companion, that, beyond such horrific circumstances, all is well, constitutes the only lasting security there is.’

(From ‘Yardstick’, story in *Life With Fred*)

320 **A grateful – and curious – fairy**

The fairy was looking at me in awe, tears of gratitude in her eyes.

‘But however did you do all that?’ she asked. ‘Humans cannot do magic.’

‘No magic,’ I said, smiling, ‘just technology.’

‘What is technology?’

‘I borrowed the giant searchlights from the local army base. The commanding officer is a friend of mine. The robot is of the type they use for dealing with bombs. And another good buddy of mine is a computer wizard. The Supreme Goblin wasn’t real, it was a hologram. And my friend’s was the voice booming through the big loudspeakers. He’s out in the meadow tidying up.’

‘Er ... please forgive my ignorance, but what are searchlights, and what is a robot, and what is a hologram, and what are loudspeakers?’

‘Do you really need to know?’ I asked softly.

She laughed. ‘No, I do not. As far as I am concerned it’s human magic. The only thing I need to know is that my tree is safe now.’

‘It most certainly is.’

(From ‘Whose Tree?’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

321 **The importance of touch**

Many associate intimate touch solely with sexual pleasure; a great pity since this is such a limited perception. But sadder yet, there still exists a touch-shy taboo – a taboo pervasively observed by some inhabitants of traditional, conservative nations, most notably the English-speaking variety ...

What richness of communication and human communion we miss or dismiss when we succumb to the mores of a culture that has schooled us to spin the sinister web of suspicion around the caring kiss of support, the gentle touch of empathy and the caress of human warmth, imparted with spontaneous generosity and not a trace of ulterior motivation – or that, even if humanly felt, considerably concealed.

(From 'Touch', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

322 **To be or not to do**

Doing comes out of being; it is never an end in itself.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

323 **Applying for a job and what employers seek**

Applying for that position you really want (or need): *the most important sales job you will ever do* ... almost! Persuading the girl/man of your dreams to be yours is probably the only task that is of more cosmic importance! But there is no advice in *Just The Job!* on this crucial assignment! ...

Employers rarely expect to find the ideal employee, so frequently state what is essential, and then what is desirable in a candidate. A good rule of thumb is this: if you have the essentials and a reasonable cross-section of the desirables, apply for the job. Once you have convinced the employer that you can do the job, the employer is thereafter most interested in answering this question: 'Is this the type of person we would be happy to have in our organisation; would we be comfortable working with him/her?' This is where personality and attitudes are vital.

(From the booklet *Just The Job!*)

324 **Strong words – not to be taken too seriously please**

Literary critics – self-appointed arbiters of what constitutes good writing – feed like parasites on the work of others creating, in the process, a pseudo-intellectual subculture that becomes self-perpetuating. It spawns a mini-industry which generates volumes of unintelligible, esoteric claptrap and provides jobs in large numbers for college professors, lecturers and other literary vivisectionists. Students, under the guise of learning to ‘appreciate literature’ learn, in reality, to dissect creative writing into tiny pieces, thereby depriving it of its essence and beauty. Sadly, these once idealistic young people, who originally but wanted to nurture a love of the language and celebrate the wonder of words, eventually conclude that analysis and interpretation are what the pursuit of literary excellence is all about, and become the parasites of the next generation.

(From ‘On Literary Criticism’, essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

325 **Affirming others**

What I am recognising here is that I have been given the gift of affirming others in what they do. When somebody shares with me something that they have created, I always respond for I am able immediately to see the intrinsic worth, beauty and wonder of what they have produced. The sincere ‘Isn’t that just wonderful?’ that then emanates from my lips comes straight from the heart.

As time goes by, this gift is extending to being increasingly able to affirm people just for who they are. And for the same reason: I can see the intrinsic worth, beauty and wonder of that person. Even when I am unable to affirm them face-to-face because of a personality clash, their diffidence, my reticence or whatever, I am still able to appreciate them from a distance. This is an imperfect process and, of course, I come across people that I find difficult to handle and am better off avoiding, but my ability to perceive the true essence of people is improving all the time.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

326 **Appraisal**

‘Like I said, in matters literary, I am balefully unschooled.’

‘But your – our – writings are wonderful,’ said Lucille, a slightly wounded tone in her voice.

‘Oh absolutely, old thing, they’re terrific, but one would hardly think of our brainchildren as attaining the esoteric pinnacle of literary achievement. One can picture, can one not, the disapproving grimaces of the world’s future literati, as they thumb through *The Collected Works of Ken O’Sullivan*. No, decidedly not; what we produce, though praiseworthy in its own way, is neither high-flying nor high-minded. Literary excellence, however one might define that elusive characteristic, is not my thing. “Entertaining” is the word that springs to mind, but one would never describe my – our – pieces as great literature.’

‘Precisely,’ said Lucille.

‘Precisely what?’ I asked, puzzled.

‘Entertaining is precisely what they are.’

‘Yes, I know; I just said that.’

‘And entertaining – at times helpful – is all you ever intended them to be.’

‘Er, yes; I suppose it is.’

‘They entertain you, they entertain me, they entertain a cohort of loyal friends and acquaintances and they entertain a substantial and growing sector of an appreciative public.’

‘True,’ I murmured.

‘Esoteric, high-flying, high-minded creations do not. They appeal to esoteric, high-flying, high-minded people. One in no way judges these worthy men and women but, in terms of numbers, they do not constitute what one might term a significant caucus.’

‘I’d never thought about it like that before.’

(From ‘One Man’s Meat’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

327 **If I just get out of the way ...**

I have witnessed many tidal waves
And I always stood firm
To attempt to prevent
The flood from proceeding
And inundating my life.
It seemed, at the time,
The best thing to do.
No wonder I always got flattened;
I'm lucky I didn't drown!
But at last I got sense
Just to stand to one side,
Let the oncoming tide
Rush frantically by.
Dramatic to watch
But far less traumatic,
And often the side wash
Is cooling and cleansing
And leaves a residue
From which I can learn
A valuable lesson:
With the gifts you have given,
Keep life simple but true ...
And leave the tidal waves to you.

(‘Tidal Waves’, poem in *The Power Of Light*)

328 **Life the teacher**

When I am stuck in my life (an all too frequent occurrence I may say!), is it because there is some lesson in my present or past experience that I have not yet learned, and the process of life will not let me move on until I have acquired the relevant insight or knowledge? I certainly think so, although there can be other reasons such as ill health. Thus, it is important for me to affirm that I am willing to learn whatever it is in my life's experience that remains as yet unlearned, and equally willing to take whatever practical steps are necessary to achieve that.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

329 **Help!**

Urgently required

Distressed client with long and varied experience seeks a highly gifted and divinely inspired therapist/healer to help undo the damage done by other therapists/healers. Those who do not understand that 'challenge' is a euphemism for 'invade', who are unable to keep their own issues and agendas under wraps, who do not know how to apply TLC to every situation and who focus on illness rather than wellness need not apply. The individual I am looking for will intuitively know that this cry for help is directed at him/her and, equally, will know what to say in response to this advertisement in order to convince me that he/she is the right person. If you are the one, name your price. Box No.

The response to the advertisement

My dear Ken,

I read your advertisement with great interest and compassion. I can see that you need the very best of help, but let me at once reassure you: things are not anything like as bad as they seem; a little time with me and all will be well, for wellness is your birthright and my design. I never challenge or invade and TLC is my stock-in-trade. I am not enclosing my CV but I AM well known by reputation. You can contact me any way, any place, any time, and I am really looking forward to hearing from you. Indeed it would be a joy and a privilege to work with you. As you may have divined, I knew intuitively that your cry for help was directed at me and, equally, I know that what I have said here in response to your advertisement will convince you that I am the one.

With love beyond your wildest dreaming,

God

PS The only issue, the sole agenda I have is unconditional love for which reason, as you will readily understand, my beloved one, there is no charge.

(From 'The Advertisement & The Response',
story in *Oh, My Head!*)

330 **I am good enough**

How I admire your courageous battle against the old messages of not being good or worthy enough – and for winning through. Every time I beat those old messages into subjection, I weaken their power, hence their ability to attack me with such force in the future. I may never be fully rid of them, but if I persistently speak to them in the only language they understand, these old messages eventually get tired of waiting in ambush for me. I love what Walt Whitman* said: *I exist as I am, that is enough*. He was right.

(From a letter, November 2005)

* 1819–1892. American poet.

331 **The fairy way of doing things**

On the occasion on which Jasmine called to my study, gave me her name and told me that she wanted me as the human with whom she would work to fulfil her life's purpose, she said that I should call her whenever I needed her and she would come post-haste. A few days later I decided to give it a try.

‘Are you there anywhere, Jasmine?’

There wasn't an immediate reply, but after about twenty seconds, there was a fluttering noise and she flew in the open window.

‘You called, Master?’

‘I'm not your master; I'm your friend,’ I said in feigned sternness.

‘Only joking, only joking! And in case you're wondering,’ she went on, reading my thoughts, ‘what happens if you call me or I need you and the window is closed? Simple! I just come in anyway.’

‘But how ...?’

‘Don't ask,’ she replied, laughing. ‘I'm a fairy, remember? I come in through a window or door if it's open because that seems like the civilised thing to do, but, at other times, closed windows and doors and suchlike obstacles are no problem.’

(From ‘Mission Impossible’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

332 **A bad dream**

I had not heard from Lucille for several days, and small wonder, given her outburst on the last occasion on which we conversed. Naturally, I was more than a little miffed about it. I mean, I can take that kind of obscene language from all and sundry if I have to, but not from Lucille; it's just not her style. I had never seen her behave like that before. Indeed, I was still in a state of shock, and contemplating the whole episode had left me bereft of much of my sleep for the previous few nights. Anyway, by the time I had struggled through to mid-afternoon on the day of which I write, my sleep-deprived energies ground more or less to a halt. So I lit the fire in the lounge and stretched out on the sofa, meaning only to rest my weary bones for a little while before continuing the daily grind. Predictably, with the warmth of the fire and being cloaked in overwhelming fatigue, I fell into a deep sleep within a few moments. I had a dreadful nightmare in which Lucille told me to f*** off and, as punishment, was almost immediately devoured by a Tyrannosaurus rex. Her screams were heart-rending. I tried to rescue her, brandishing my boy scout's penknife at the monster, but it just ignored me and pounded off at a staggering rate of knots, licking its lips and leaving a trail of blood on the ground. I woke up with a start, beads of perspiration standing out on my brow and, when I had gathered my senses, breathed a sigh of relief that it had only been a bad dream.

(From 'Happily Ever After', story in *Life With Lucille*)

333 **Suffering**

I once read that pain is the touchstone of all spiritual progress. If that's the case, I must be up there with the spiritual greats; I'll probably be canonised in my own lifetime!

Joking apart, mankind has doubtless been trying to make sense of suffering since the genesis of time. It strikes me, however, that there is no rationale that applies universally, and each person has to find his or her own explanation. My beloved Thérèse of Lisieux, for example, longed for suffering

because she saw that as her path to spiritual growth. I, in complete contrast, yearn for wholeness – mental, spiritual and physical – both for peace of mind and spiritual growth for myself, and so that I might reach out from and with that wholeness to others. And suffering seems to hold me back considerably from realising much of that desire. The best I have managed, so far, is to thank God for all I have been able to do, be and achieve *despite* the suffering. Although I must now, in truth, acknowledge that a great deal of what I have been enabled to give is *because of* rather than despite the trying circumstances of my life. That, I admit, leaves me feeling a little bewildered. And I continue to strive each day, sometimes valiantly, often falteringly, in the face of these difficulties, to serve and love others, not forgetting to love myself in a wholesome way as a priority. So, the suffering continues. I truly wish it were otherwise, but along with that thought comes the awareness of the crucial need for the gift of acceptance, firstly of things just as they are, about which I have written elsewhere, and secondly the profound truism that God's ways are so vastly beyond ours that we haven't a hope of understanding them – most of the time. Moreover, I need to remember that pain has the power to blind me to the countless blessings and miracles in my life – that is, if I let it.

And the age-old question always arises: How about all the evil, deprivation and natural disasters on the planet?* When I cannot deal with these, I remind myself that we are all only in transit here and no matter how bad things are now, it will be of no consequence when we get to our final home in the realm of the eternal. And if I ever become too ill or disoriented, even despairing, to see things that way – to trust in other words – the God I have come to know will do the trusting for me. That's how much I am loved.

All things considered, maybe that's *my* path.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* This question is dealt with in more depth in the essay 'Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II' in *Beyond The Rainbow*.

334 **On the way to publication?**

A word of gratitude must go to All Hallows College in Dublin who, unknowingly, over several weekends, provided me with the atmosphere to liberate the story from a period of suspended animation. Yes, that was me: the preoccupied man with the white laptop beaver away in the corner of the coffee dock – or maybe nobody noticed. As this present printing is a limited private edition (currently only one copy is planned), I also want to thank, in advance, the as yet unknown publisher who will display the wisdom of conveying this delightful story to the waiting public!

(From the Introduction to the novel *Black On Magenta*)

335 **Blissful inertia**

One evening after dinner, my good lady wife posed the following question: ‘What are you doing this evening?’

‘Nothing!’

‘What do you mean “nothing”?’

‘What I mean, light of my life, is that I propose to sit here, comfortably ensconced in my favourite, reclining armchair, for the duration of the forthcoming p.m., and actively do absolutely nothing. My objective in so doing – or, more correctly, in so not doing – is, for a few hours at least, to establish in my life a blissful, fantasy-like state of just being, and relinquish my enslavement to activity, performance and the achievement of goals.’

(From ‘Interlude’, story in *Life With Fred*)

336 **Endless Love**

Love was born in the cradle of eternity;
Yet it had no beginning and can have no end,
For Love will endure in every heart,
In every soul, through trial and grace,
Beyond the realms of time and space,
Until the last day of forever.

(‘Perpetual Light’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

337 **Eternal love**

I'm mad about you,
Daft about you,
Crazy about you.
You're mad about me,
Daft about me,
Crazy about me.
Yes, I'm mad
And you're daft
And we're crazy
About love
And in love
And on love,
Devout love,
Within love
And long love,
For ever and ever and ever –
A love that's intense and alluring,
A passion of fire that's enduring,
That mad seems,
Daft, crazy, inane.
 But that
 Is why I
 Am so sane.

(‘That Is Why’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

338 **God understands**

I have said elsewhere that God is the only one with whom it is safe to get angry. He understands how we feel, will not retaliate, will only respond in love. As a case in point, I was in a lot of pain and confusion a little while ago, and I made the following prayer:

‘God, I know all this stuff won’t matter at all when we get to the next world. But I’ll tell you this much: it really f***** matters now, so what are you going to do about it?’

Like I said, he understands.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

339 **Compassion for a fellow creature**

Tossed by the uncaring waves against the stone-encrusted shore – a little, unidentifiable ball of fluff, perhaps the washed-up remains of some long-dead sea-plant. Insignificant really; so why did it attract my attention? It was because it gave the impression of not being totally unresponsive to its surroundings and somehow seemed to be struggling against a vastly superior force, the mighty ocean, the shrimp versus the whale so to speak. A relic of the past would have already submitted to its destiny, not feigning, in futile reincarnation, to combat the uncombattable; but this scarcely existing entity contained life, not death.

I drew nearer. There it was, tiny being, in danger of being dashed to pieces against the unyielding stones – a newly hatched duckling on the sea shore, miles from its normal habitat and, worse, separated from its natural mother. Exhausted from its fight for survival, it relinquished its inherited antipathy to humans and surrendered itself, in grateful relief, to the warmth of my gently cupping hands.

(From 'The Orphan', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

340 **The value of willingness**

If I can install the word 'Willingness' (particularly the willingness to change) firmly in my psyche, I can achieve many realistic goals which I previously believed impossible.

(From 'Perception' in *Communications – A Course Manual*)

341 **Early knowledge**

At birth – pretty obviously – I knew nothing. Very quickly, however, I acquired the only information I needed to ensure my survival: that a piercing yell or a timely tantrum would, in the twinkling of an eye, provide the comfort of a nappy-change, a reassuring cuddle and a tickle under the chin, or my essential liquid nourishment from whatever source, authentic or artificial; I can't say that I remember.

(From 'Knowledge', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

342 **Unfinished business**

My father's mother, Alice, died in 1919 when he was only eleven. He spoke about her from time to time, and it was obvious that he was greatly attached to her. Many years later, in 1985, when it came to his turn to pass on to the next life, he asked me to request the night nurse to pray for him to his mother if he should die during the night. This I did, and that she did.

A year or so later, I was visiting my paternal first cousin. We were talking about our mutual grandmother, when she said, 'Do you know I have a large photograph of her, but it is in very bad condition.' She brought it out for me to see, and went on to tell me that, many years earlier, when it was in considerably better shape, my father had asked her for it with the intention of having it restored by an artist (prior to the age of computer technology). He subsequently mislaid the picture and this upset him very much. It was clearly important to him to have the picture of her restored, and he greatly regretted losing the only known picture of his mother. And he was bewildered as to how he could have mislaid it because it was quite large – about A3 in size. A few months after his death, my stepmother was cleaning out his room, pulled out a wardrobe from the wall, and found the missing photograph. It had slipped down between the wardrobe and the wall – unfortunately a damp wall, and the picture had deteriorated to the state in which my cousin now showed it to me, for my stepmother had returned it to its original home.

(From 'In The Picture', story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

343 **When it's not my stuff**

As the well-known spiritual teacher Anthony de Mello said: *We don't see other people as they are but as we are.* It has been my experience, time and time again, that when somebody tells me where I am at or what is wrong with me and what I should do about it, they are giving me an extract from their own autobiography.

(From 'Check Mate', story in *Ob, My Head!*)

344 **A child at heart**

In selecting a title, I wanted to imply that it is a book of pieces for speaking out loud and also give some hint of the author's character. I have often remarked, and even more frequently felt, that while I am a mature man in my early sixties, a substantial portion of me is still a child at heart. It is the child that can still marvel that he just has to flick a switch and on comes a light, that he can press a few buttons and talk to somebody on the far side of the planet, that he sits into a four-wheeled, motorised cocoon in his driveway and it brings him wherever he wants to go. It is the child who goes to the top of the mountain, looks out over the beauty of the landscape and just says 'Wow!', who gasps at the wonder of a single flower in blossom, who marvels at the magnificence of two swans in flight low over the water or a field of myriad sunflowers all facing up to the sun. And it is both the man and the child who are fascinated with language. I wouldn't change it for the world.

(From the Introduction to *The Voice Of The Man-child*)

345 **Simplicity – please!**

Nice to get a compliment now and again, especially from Fred. Which set me thinking about compliments and the varying effects of same on different psyches. Why is it, I wondered, that some people seem unable to accept a compliment graciously while others blossom under their influence, thereby conferring a sense of worth on the giver? Of course, the whole thing goes a lot deeper to parental influence, peer pressure, cultural and anthropological issues, even genetic factors and is, no doubt, intimately bound up with religious and social conditioning; also, very possibly, an extrasensory ... Well, I won't bore you with the details, but before I knew it, my mind had gone off on about thirty-five different tangents ... The net result was that, at the end of three quarters of an hour, I was completely screwed up and found myself clutching at my hair and gasping for breath.

(From 'Oh, For Simplicity!', story in *Life With Fred*)

346 **Oh, those numbers!**

I have a tax number,
A fax number,
A PIN number,
Bank account numbers,
Credit card numbers,
Cash and cheque card numbers,
A passport number,
A bevy of insurance policy numbers
And numbers in my address book by the score.
My house has a short number,
My car has a long number,
My telephone has a medium-sized number,
My blood group has a negative number
And so would my golf handicap – if I had one.
I once had a school number,
I now have a works number,
Intermittently I have had examination numbers,
And every item I purchase is quoted in numbers.
The span of my life is reckoned
In all too rapidly advancing numbers,
And my days are definitely numbered.
Well, aren't yours?

(From 'The Numbers Game', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

347 **The purpose of pain**

In thinking about spirituality over a long period, I came to see that the darkness is an integral part of *my* spirituality for, as I have articulated elsewhere, the pain is the soil in which the miracles of my life grow. At times, the anguish can be so intense, that the illusion is created that I have been abandoned by the God Of My Life, or even that there is no god at all. It is most fitting, therefore, in this third volume, to give space to some poems which speak of this despair and abandonment which is the ground in which the wonders – of which so many of my other poems speak wholeheartedly – are cultivated.

(From the Introduction to *Beyond The Illusion*)

348 **Collecting students' exam bloomers**

To say that this masterpiece is by Ken O'Sullivan is technically inaccurate. It is actually the enlightened work of those compassionate students of the Department of Hotel and Catering Management who, appreciating the purgatory I endure when correcting examinations, tests and projects, contrive to make regular gaffes to keep me amused – and awake.

If you will look at the arithmetic involved in the number of bloomers collected in the first ten years as opposed to the ensuing fifteen, several conclusions present themselves for consideration: 1) I have become more observant; 2) The student body has developed a more prolific sense of humour; 3) The students, knowing about my first collection, now make deliberate errors in the hope of becoming immortalised in print (even if anonymously); 4) The students have become more stupid. I will leave you to decide, when you have had a chance to browse through the products of the young brains which have been under my tutelage. I was about to say that the real reason is the enormous increase in student numbers, but that's not half as much fun as the other reasons proffered, so I won't say it ...

Heartfelt gratitude also to my colleagues for their additions to the collection ... and to myself for the painstaking proofreading (finding mistakes in a collection of mistakes is no easy task), and finally to the hundreds of students who are the real authors of this book.

(From the Introduction to *Fawltly Toorism – Millennium Edition*)

349 **Worthwhile comparison**

If you will look at your knowledge of the dreadful conditions that most of the people of the world have to endure – whether from newspapers, radio and TV news bulletins or your own knowledge of geography – you will readily realise that you are among the most privileged young people on this planet.

(From a letter, June 1996)

350 **God is extravagant**

*The good God has always treated me like a spoiled child ...
He has always made me desire whatever he wanted to give me.*
(Thérèse of Lisieux)

I have written more than once about the ways in which some religions/philosophies ... tell us to pray *only* for God's will, and how this never sat comfortably with me. Now, when I look back over my life ... I can see that my experience has almost always been the opposite, that God has answered many of my lifelong questions and granted many of my wishes, always, of course, for my good; he has never given me anything that was not for my well-being. He has not always given me exactly what I asked for, but has taken the core energy of the request and transformed his responses into more than I could ever have hoped for. Indeed, seen from this perspective, I don't believe God has ever said 'no' to me. There are requests which I think weren't granted, but I have learned that the ways in which God decides to grant a request and his timing are not mine.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

351 **May this never happen**

In the depths of a bitter-cold winter's night,
The fire had taken dramatic hold,
And their beloved dwelling-house
Was all but engulfed.
Thankfully, the family had escaped,
And were now huddled together on the lawn,
Comforting each other,
Watching in dismay
As their home, memories and dreams
Disintegrated in the callous flames ...
Well, not quite all the family.
From an upper floor window,
Came a frightened, plaintiff cry:
'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!'

(From 'Trust', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

352 **Parents: please consider**

To emphasise the point I made earlier: if we decide that this [spirituality] is not for us and our children, can we be really honest with ourselves and ask if our decision is actually in their interest or is it born of our own disbelief and/or prejudices? Would we, for instance, through similar inertia, deny our children the possibility of doing something good and wholesome in any other field just because it was not our own path? If we reject religion or, far more importantly, give our children no grounding in spirituality, then we have, on their behalf, effectively thrown the baby out with the bathwater and done them a serious injustice. An equally valid concern is whether we have also thrown the baby out with the bathwater for ourselves. I earnestly request parents to give this matter the serious consideration it deserves.

(From 'Higher Values For Our Children?',
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

353 **A special place in the mountains**

Let me now tell you something of the place I have come to love. As I mentioned, it is a village called St Jean-de-Valers in the Auvergne region of France. It is situated in a most charming valley completely surrounded by mountains. Since I loved the hills and mountains in my homeland, these are a source of great solace to me. It is as if their presence is composed of more than mere rock and earth, wild flowers and trees, and that they in some way know and protect me. There is one place in particular that nurtures me more than any other and I go there often. It is a mountain pass, accessible from the village by foot in about one hour and a half. What I find there is difficult to describe, but it is a peace that I can find nowhere else. The official name is Col des Reclus because just beyond it, in a sheltered recess on the mountainside, is a smaller village than the one in which I live, named Les Reclus where the people have always kept very much to themselves and still do to this day. It is from this village that Elizabeth's grandmother, Aurélie, originally came. Les Reclus seems a

strange name for a village. It is unlikely that the inhabitants called it that themselves and one must conjecture that this name was given to it by the people in the valley. Knowledge of where the residents of Les Reclus came from is lost in the mists of history, but they are different in their traditions and ways and, as well as speaking French, have their own language, quite different, the origins of which are obscure. Because of the similarity of a certain number of words, some believe that it is a distant relative of Arabic, but nobody knows for certain. They earn their living mostly by sheep farming and making woollen garments, which they sell at the weekly market in St Jean-de-Valers. There are a few artisans who make beautiful craft goods which they also sell at the market.

Perhaps the reason that I find Col des Reclus so peaceful is that it has been considered a holy place for many hundreds of years, and it has some inexpressible quality that confers a feeling of serenity. People still visit it for what they find here, particularly during the summer months. There is a well from which visitors may take away water or they just sit a while on the rocks nearby to reflect or pray. I go up there often. I usually bring a small bottle of the water back down with me – to have a part of the place in my home in the valley. As I sit on the rocks near the well, I can see down into the countryside below me, the lake beyond my village, St Jean-de-Valers itself which nestles in the embrace of the valley, the trees on the mountainside, and I am always in awe at the way the light plays with the landscape. As I behold all this, my thinking often becomes temporarily suspended and, for a while, I am one with Nature. Thus you will understand why I find this mountain pass so special.

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

354 **Healing prayer**

Let your Divine healing flow through my body, mind and spirit, clearing all darkness, ignorance, blockages and toxins, and replacing them with your love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

355 **Is it possible to love everybody?**

Yes, it is. But there are three essential qualifications; two I will cite now, the third a little further on. If we hold that love is primarily a feeling, then the likelihood is that we will love but a few. If, on the other hand, we are able to discern that love is primarily a decision, then we can aspire to love everybody. Further, we will need to have come a certain distance along the roadway of life and almost certainly have suffered some of its vicissitudes in order that our compassion for others may evolve sufficiently, before we can see the wisdom of making a decision to love everybody ...

But we haven't a hope of coming anywhere near loving everybody unless we first learn to love ourselves in a wholesome way. If we do not, our lack of love for ourselves will, mostly unconsciously, project itself onto others. Virtually all the major religions and philosophies affirm this truth in one way or another.

(From 'Surely That's Impossible?', essay in
Reality And Illusion & Other Essays)

356 **It pays to be wary about certain teachings**

Indeed, if I don't fully realise that I have to be very wary of this kind of stuff [certain secular and spiritual teaching], then I have gained nothing from past experience. How often have I tried to 'learn' from others in the intellectual and spiritual realm, only to come an excruciatingly painful cropper because what they were teaching would not take root in my mind or spirit, causing me to believe that there was something seriously lacking in me ...

To put it another way: undoubtedly there is wonderful wisdom out there ... but *my repeated experience* has been that the words of another do not have the power to convert into positive transformation within me; they have no intrinsic energy, and they have no power – beyond stimulating the intellect – *until and unless they are empowered within me by the God Of My Life.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

357 **L'Ange Déchu (the fallen angel) – for Francophiles**

The anglophone makes many gaffes
In French pronunciation,
The worst of which is 'U' as 'OO'
Which lacks enunciation
 Between pursed lips instead of rounded.
 This takes much repetition
 To thus avoid, in daily speech,
 The sin of 'OO's' commission.
To make things worse, one often finds
An 'U' and 'OO' in tandem;
Tu toujours say it right way round,
Not 'OO'/'U' sounds at random.
 But if one overdoes the pursing,
 The thing becomes a farce;
 What should have been a simple neck
 Turns out to be an arse.
The German 'Ü' has similar quirks,
Yet only French 'U' ravages
The student with the Devil's curse:
The Angel of the cabbages!

(*L'Ange Déchu*, Poem in *Overdoing It!*)

358 **Better not to bottle things up**

'You have been immersed in deep thought for hours now.
One look at your face tells me that the universe lays a heavy
burden on your shoulders, and you haven't shared one word
of it – all bottled up inside ...'

I was deeply moved by her concern and loyalty. This was
way beyond the responsibilities of a Muse, but then, as those
of you who have been following these chronicles will have
discovered, Lucille is no ordinary Muse. Once again I had
underestimated her intuition and her capacity for sharing my
sorrows. You see, I had remained silent on purpose so as not
to upset her, but she knew well that all was not as it should be,
and my reticence had only caused her even more distress.

(From 'Trouble Shared', story in *Life With Lucille*)

359 **Ask for help in times of trouble**

I can't do it alone. Apart from a higher power, I need the help of other good people, preferably those who have been through a similar experience.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

360 **Facing up to the inevitable**

'What,' asked Fred in uncharacteristically sombre vein, 'would you do if you were to wake up on the morrow – the day after today if you'd rather – and found yourself, as it were, dead?'

'What kind of a confoundedly stupid question is that, morose pessimist?' I retorted. He was a silly ass, of course, to have had the unmitigated idiocy to pose such a patently self-contradictory question, but I, nevertheless, squirmed uncomfortably. This would not have been my chosen topic of conversation. I like pleasant things, you know. Yes, pleasant things. That is why I never read the newspapers or watch the ever-present telly, so why the hell was he mucking around with unpleasant hypotheses?

'What would you do?' he continued, doggedly.

I squirmed again, even more uncomfortably

'Well?'

I fought back the tears, blast them. 'Fred, you're a hard taskmaster, damn you. I think I'd disintegrate with overwhelming sorrow that I hadn't told my loved ones half enough how much I love them.'

He didn't respond immediately; said nothing, as a matter of fact for what seemed like a month of exceedingly wet Sundays. I just sat there, therefore, and continued to squirm, much too overcome with what I had just said to berate Fred for his unwarranted silence.

I was wrapped in soulful misery, contemplating the appalling pain we humans inflict on each other by leaving so much unsaid, when he whispered in my right ear.

'Why, old companion, don't you save us both, and our loved ones, from that unthinkable fate, and tell them. Today.'

(*'Today's The Day'*, story in *Life With Fred*)

361 **Doing?**

So much of my life has concentrated on doing things, some of them indispensable, like bringing up my family. I do not know whether I am now developing a genuinely new perspective on doing, or am influenced by the fact that, in the current phase of my life, I am largely at liberty to 'do' the things I want to do. But it strikes me that, in this life, very little is needful, that is that there is very little I need and very little I need to do. I may want to have things and want to do things; I may feel I need the validation of doing something worthwhile with my life. Alternatively I may be conned or coerced by the so-called 'civilisation' in which I live into doing, performing at an ever greater level and told that the desire for more things is valid. But my premise stands: very little is needful. The more I realise how much I am loved by God, the more I fall in love with him, the more I realise that I have everything I need and the only thing I have to 'do' is receive it. Any doing that then emanates from this love relationship takes on a totally different significance: true doing is an outpouring of the synergy of the lover and the loved, whether it is washing the dishes or running a country. It is one of the tragedies of human life that we see all too little of this kind of doing.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

362 **Anguished English**

'Fred, I need some advice,' I said, humbling myself, yet with tongue in cheek, for I really didn't think my psychic sidekick could produce the goodies. No, come to think of it, that's not entirely correct. If I had been speaking with tongue in cheek, I would have said, 'Fwed, I 'eed thum ad-thice.' It all goes to demonstrate the inadequacy of the idioms in the English language. I mean, just try speaking with tongue in cheek yourself and you will undoubtedly get my drift. It's all very well if you understand the symbolic or cryptic message enshrined in the expression, but if you don't, you only finish up making a fool of yourself.

(From 'Tongue In Cheek', story in *Life With Fred*)

363 **Learning compassion**

His entire being and the law of the forest told him to attack and reclaim his rightful property. But, inexplicably, he could not bring himself to launch an offensive. The longer he perched on the branch contemplating the injustice of it all, the more he found his spirit troubled with the strange idea that, perhaps, right should not always manifest in might.

He struggled with this evolving awareness until his birdbrain eventually comprehended the reason for his reluctance to wreak vengeance. With his physical eye, all he could see was the usurping cuckoo comfortably ensconced in the once neglected nest that he, the sparrow, had so carefully tended and had come to treasure so much. But the eye of his heart penetrated beyond appearances and perceived, beneath the squatter's unruffled feathers, a deeply wounded creature.

(From 'The Sparrow', story in *In My Write Mind*)

364 **Faith and trust**

Faith is a conscious decision whereas trust is an intuitive response.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

365 **Complexity? Hell, no thanks!**

'I say, Fred,' I pleaded, wilting under the pressure, 'have a heart for goodness' sake! That's the kernel of the whole problem – I just cannot be simple, and I've really been having a hard time of it, and for so long. I think I have microscopes where my eyes should be for I continually examine everything – particularly things of the mind – far too meticulously, and that causes a lot of harrowing and unnecessary pain. My espoused, long-suffering sharer of joys and sorrows once suggested that I should have taken "Analysis" for my confirmation name, and I dare say she's right. But the most distressing thing, Fred, is that all my efforts to change have failed most dismally.'

(From 'Oh, For Simplicity!', story in *Life With Fred*)

366 **Doing our best**

One of the things we need throughout our lives in order to maintain a healthy sense of self-esteem is the assurance that we are doing our best. But disturbances, and sometimes serious consequences, can arise when we confuse ‘best’ with ‘most’.

What’s the difference? Let me give you an imaginary example that I used to offer to my communications students (in Hotel Management). I tell them one day that, about a year earlier, I had attended a celebration to mark the tenth anniversary of the graduation of a particular group. They ask me if the graduates have all been successful. I cite two instances.

Mary worked in various hotel departments for two years, then met a farmer and got married. They turned the large farmhouse into a lovely guesthouse, and it became very popular. However, they only open from April to October; for the remaining months, they spend more time with their three children, relax and develop their own interests, and always go to the sunshine for two weeks at Christmas or Easter. They are not wealthy, but they are comfortable and live contentedly.

John joined a major multinational hotel group, worked all the hours God gave – his work was effectively his life – and through both effort and talent, just before last year’s reunion, he was appointed the youngest ever chief executive of the corporation, with a seven figure salary including bonuses.

‘So,’ the students remark, ‘John was far more successful.’ ‘It depends how you look at it,’ I reply. ‘I forgot to mention that John died of a heart attack last month. He never got married, he was an only child, and his parents are devastated.’

Mary did her best; John did his most.

Doing our best acknowledges that we are finite human beings with gifts and talents, but also faults and failings, strengths and weaknesses. There is a clear recognition that we have limitations and that it’s normal to make mistakes. Balance is the key here. Doing one’s most would seem to be born of perfectionism and excessive ambition, possibly even greed in some cases; and it’s unbalanced.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

367 **Eccentric? Me? What do you mean?**

Here it is – my latest eclectic collection of poems, from the sad to the silly to the sublime. Nice word that, ‘eclectic’. It sounds sort of intellectual. In fact it simply means ‘diverse’. The not-so-kind would say ‘random’, suggesting that I just threw a random selection of my poems together and printed them off under the title of *No Rest For The Wicked*. They would be wrong. I have a sound philosophical reason for choosing not to edit most of my volumes of poems into thematic groupings. Of course I did do this with a couple of them, and have a couple more planned, but most of the poetry volumes to date are just, well, eclectic. The philosophical reason is based on what one might call somnolent inertia. Nice term that, ‘somnolent inertia’. It sounds sort of intellectual. In fact it simply means ‘laziness’. I just couldn’t be bothered, and since these privately produced volumes are put together primarily for my own enjoyment, and I’m not trying to prove anything to anyone, what the hell does it matter? That said, it would be a pleasant bonus if you find a few items in this book that you like or that mean something to you, theme or no theme.

Mind you, I did make one major concession to editing. I was looking for an unusual way to sequence the poems in this production, something that nobody had thought of before, and came up with an absolute gem. I have put them in alphabetical order! ...

I don’t have anything else to say, except to thank you for humouring me by reading *No Rest For The Wicked*. The thanks are given, of course, on the assumption that you will humour me; if not, then you can go and ... No, no, Ken; a little restraint, if you please. Coarseness ill befits a poet of your calibre!

(From the Introduction to *No Rest For The Wicked*)

368 **Things**

Once I have enough, more material things only clutter up my spirit.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

369 **A fairy tries to come up with a solution**

‘Maybe I could ...’ she began.

‘Yes?’

‘No, that wouldn’t work. Perhaps if I were to ... No, that’s too complicated. Ah! There’s always the old reliable ... suffering pixies, I’ve forgotten it! The spell with ... No; useless. Hold on! I’ve just remembered something else: when all else failed, my father used to ... No, that wouldn’t work either. Too old-fashioned.’

‘More’s the pity,’ I said, disappointed.

‘It’s got me completely foxed, I’m afraid.’

(From ‘Mission Impossible’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

370 **Lucille speaks of her origin and destiny**

‘First of all, you are quite right in saying that we considered ourselves the be-all and the end-all for quite some time. But that conviction has disappeared long since. It became apparent to us, about two thousand years ago, that we were not in control of the universe, that creation pre-existed us, and that we were not the authors of our own existence, thus leaving us with the crucial question: Who created us? Most of the stories about our beginnings that have been handed down to your century are indeed myth. The truth is that we are uncertain about our origins, and even more uncertain about our destiny, and ...’

Lucille ran out of vocabulary and turned white. My God! Fear! I had never seen her experience that emotion before. She had never failed me; now I had do something to help her. I murmured a quick prayer and spoke spontaneously.

‘Lucille, the creator that I have come to know is infinitely loving, all-powerful, and has a place in everlasting light and peace for all his created beings. We are eternal; you said so yourself a while ago. There is no need to fear, only to let go and let God.’

The colour returned to Lucille’s cheeks and she looked at me with gratitude. ‘Thank you,’ she said softly.

(From ‘To Be Continued’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

371 **One view of theology**

It seems to me that theology largely seeks to answer questions. When one comes to *know* God's incredible love deep within, either the questions get answered in the most wondrous manner, or else they cease to matter or they disappear. For *me*, formulating or studying theology as a means of coming to know God would be like researching and assembling a vast corpus of impressive knowledge to seek/win somebody's affection when all I need is to do is ask them for a hug and a kiss ...

I want to reverse any impression given in the earlier part of this section [not given here] that I am criticising or belittling the entire field of theology. If I yearn to be truly loving – and I do – I must live and let live from my heart. More, I must recognise that, for many, the study of theology may well be the path to a deeper relationship with God. For this reason, *I can only speak for me*: why would one want to engage in the intellectual study of God when one can have a stupendously, transcendently, mind-blowingly, passionate and enduring love affair with him which is available to us even if we had never read a word or considered a doctrine?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

372 **Perhaps we all make excuses at times**

How oft have I scoffed at the droll hippopotamus,
Sitting all day in a swamp on her bottomus,
With nought on her psyche but rolling in mud,
Her meagre excuse: that it cools down the blood.
The actual reason is far less elaborate:
It's simpler to wallow in mud than collaborate
With those who exhort her to be more industrious.
Possessing no zeal for becoming illustrious,
She feels more secure in a cocoon of mud
Than nipping her indolence right in the bud,
And makes a vocation of slouching in ooze,
Since, being at the bottom, there's nothing to lose.

(From 'Judge Not ...', poem in *One By One*)

373 Awareness a long time dawning

It was only in my late fifties that I came to a realisation that God – a sense of spirituality if you prefer – has been important to me since I was a very young child. I wasn't 'holy' or 'goody goody'; it was just that I had an innate sense, albeit a very simple, childlike one, that there is more going on in the world than we are picking up with the intellect or the senses – that there is another dimension. How I acquired this sense is interesting.

(From 'A Gift Restored', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

374 Do the Irish ever talk about anything else?

Strange thing about the weather; have you noticed? It's always there. Most other aspects of life seem to come and go but the weather is always with us, pursuing some mysterious objective that escapes even the most incisive mind. That alone is cause for annoyance, but what really provokes untold vexation is the moodiness of the damn thing.

One day it's in rare old humour, dressing itself in finery that everybody can admire. Then, without even an 'Excuse me,' it changes into vengeful wrath, soaking and blowing on all in its path like some spoiled child who, in boldly misguided exuberance, points Daddy's hose at little old ladies. At other times it gives you the 'deep freeze' treatment as if you didn't exist. At the opposite extreme it waxes hot and causes you to perspire with it even though you have not the slightest interest in whatever cause it espouses. That is bad enough when it occurs on a day-to-day basis. The absolute insufferability of its vagaries is displayed, however, on those all-too-frequent days when it flaunts its tempestuous, multiple humours all within one 24-hour period and with confusing, kaleidoscopic changeability – one minute this, the next minute that.

In the country in which I live, of course, the plus side of all this is that, if you don't like the current weather conditions, just wait a few minutes.

(From 'Weather', story in *In My Write Mind*)

375 **Pain has a purpose**

‘Oh! Look at that,’ said Tomas pointing to a spot a few yards away.

‘What?’

‘Over there.’

‘I don’t see anything.’

‘That very pretty flower growing next to the rock.’

‘Ah, I see it. Yes, it’s nice.’

‘It is beautiful,’ corrected Tomas, ‘but what do you notice about it?’

‘Um ... nothing in particular. It’s just growing there.’

‘It is growing in a heap of loose pebbles and a tiny bit of earth that seems insufficient to sustain growth. Pretty rough on the flower, yet it is still blossoming most beautifully.’

David wondered what all this was about and just looked at Tomas.

‘If we could but learn a lesson from that, our lives would be very different. Instead of seeing hardships as meaningless burdens, we could regard the pain they cause as the soil in which the miracles grow.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

376 **A simple ditty from a thankful heart**

For goals achieved,
For things assayed,
I frequently endorse;
I feel the glow
Of sweet success,
In failure, no remorse.
I claim the strength,
Through thick and thin,
To, steadfast, stay the course;
But since, of self,
I have no power,
I recognise the Source.

(‘Gratitude’, poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

377 **Maverick!**

A while back, a budding writer asked me if I would read her writing. I said I would gladly. Then she said that she wanted me to critique the work. I responded that I don't believe anybody is qualified to critique anybody else's work, but there are many millions of people out there who would disagree with me! Literary criticism – dissecting the creativity of others, I sometimes call it – is a lucrative industry. The most I ever do is make gentle suggestions, asking the person to ignore them if they are not for them. Of course, I know that where writing is concerned (as in many other things), I am a maverick.

(From a letter, November 2015)

378 **A message for men about tears**

Regrettably, the ancient dictum which, with variations, runs, 'Boys don't cry and girls don't climb trees' is so deeply embedded in most male psyches, that one is tempted to believe that it has, over time, been absorbed into the gene pool.

This perverse cultural conditioning is nothing less than consummate hogwash, is utterly irrational, and has caused immense emotional damage to men – and to the women who love them – since time began. The truth? For men to cry when they need to is an unequivocal strength. The only weakness to be identified is when a man needs to cry but holds it back for all the wrong reasons.

I am immensely grateful that, in my early twenties, I was given the gift of rejecting this seriously distorted macho message. The result is that tears have helped me through the most difficult experiences of my life, and have often healed the hurts or provided the groundwork for healing.

I am not talking here about a self-indulgent weeping habit or a wailing born of hysteria, rather the wholesome acceptance of the immeasurable value of tears in our portfolio of physical and emotional resources.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See the poem 'The Way Of Tears' in *Beyond The Illusion*.

379 **Fred changes his mind – or does he?**

‘I say, Fred,’ I said animatedly. ‘Do you know what? This is the thousandth piece that I have written.’

‘Well, congratulations,’ said Fred graciously; ‘great stuff; take a bow; I’m very happy for you and all that sort of thing.’

‘Very nice of you to say so,’ I responded warmly. ‘That’s high praise indeed, coming from you, particularly in view of the fact that, on an earlier occasion, not too long since, you referred to my writing as “naïve and time-wasting drivel”.’

‘Ah, yes; well,’ said Fred, surprisingly displaying more than a little embarrassment, ‘let’s let bygones be bygones. I’ve, er ... had a change of heart. On due reflection, I have come to the mature conclusion that a more appropriate description for your work would be “prolific and highly refined crap”.’

(‘On Reflection’, story in *Life With Fred*)

380 **Be kind to yourself**

I need to be kind to myself, especially when I am in pain. I don’t mean self-indulgent; that can be destructive. I simply mean kind – treat myself like I would a dear friend or loved one who is hurting badly. I am sometimes appalled when I become aware that I am demanding standards of perfection of myself that I would never dream of asking of my family or friends.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

381 **Storms and calms**

I find that, in my life, the old saying ‘the calm before the storm’ is almost always reversed to ‘the storm before the calm’. Every storm is a precursor of a deeper awareness of just how much I am loved by the God Of My Life.

The calm before the storm brings a sense of impending doom whereas the storm before the calm creates a sense of impending happiness. Felicitous reversal! And one of the many miracles in my life.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

382 **All in good time**

If I force myself to deal with issues before I am ready, I may do damage. I really like the expression: *When the pupil is ready the teacher will appear.*

On the other hand, if I put off dealing with issues that I know need looking at now, I will also pay a price – usually more suffering. This is particularly true of dealing with resentments. The best definition of resentment I have heard is: ‘Taking poison and hoping somebody else will die!’ And the best antidote to resentment that I have come across is to pray for their well-being without any reservation, even if I don’t mean it at first, and even if I don’t believe in that sort of stuff. This doesn’t seem to make any difference to the power of this simple remedy. Nothing else works.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

383 **How unconditional is unconditional?**

Well, is God’s love truly unconditional? Surely knowing the frailty of our human nature, he has put certain safeguards in place, in the form of directives, commandments or whatever one wants to call them, so that we might know how to live our lives as he directs – and then measures our progress against them. The answer is simple: either God’s love is unconditional or it is not. ‘Unconditional’ is one of those absolute words in the English language, i.e. it can’t be qualified in any way. To say that God’s love is ‘unconditional but there are certain directives ...’ is the same as declaring that his love is ‘rather unconditional’, which is like saying that somebody is a little bit pregnant or a small bit dead.

The love I experience from God is unconditional in its absolute sense, and the reason that no directives are required is that when I experience this love, I spontaneously respond in love and I automatically want to do what is right, and if I don’t respond to that love, I am not likely to want to obey any directives unless I am conditioned (the reason for which, I believe, most people comply) or coerced.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

384 **Dark purpose**

‘The darkness is one of the most sacred places I have ever been.’

I didn’t stop to think what I meant by that when I wrote that down; it just came out. I think – in fact I know – it means that my travail has not been meaningless pain (even if it feels like that when I am in it) but the catalyst of the most indescribably beautiful mystery, beyond words or limited human expression of any kind, that state of mystery, miracle and wonder which is the most sacred place I have ever been.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

385 **Dark is dark, until ...**

Contrary to custom
In the way the word is wielded
In our daily mode of parlance,
‘Darkness’ is an absolute
That cannot be augmented
Or subtly watered down.
Either dark it is or isn’t;
To say ‘a small bit dark’
Is like saying ‘a small bit dead’;
And even if a glimmer
Were to penetrate the room
Of my soul’s sequestered dwelling
’Twere no more dark, but gloom
Where sight, though dim, still carries
And hope, though slim, still carries
My life from step to step.

But the darkness is an absolute,
And so is my despair
When I am then immersed
In its absolute obscurity,
All joy in full eclipse,
All knowledge come to nought,
All vision turned to blindness,

And I have been abandoned
To the wilderness and death;
And in my pained confusion,
Cannot see 'tis but delusion
Which fulfils a fateful purpose
Far beyond my near horizon –
To bring me to the timeless
In the tumult of the temporal,
To a mystical dimension
In the human here and now.

And so, the dark is sacred;
For, without its rapt obscurity,
I can never find maturity
Of heart and mind and spirit;
Without its apt tuition
I can never reach fruition
Of my dreams in all their substance;
Without the black of night,
I can never know the light
To illuminate the person
From the genesis of time
I was always meant to be.

(‘Dark Purpose’, poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

386 **Proper order?**

It is the soul's duty to be loyal to its own desires.

(Dame Rebecca West)

I read the above quotation and a subsequent reading in a book of reflections today ... and I addressed this rhetorical question ... ‘What is my innermost desire?’

I answered my own question immediately and spontaneously, with zero forethought: To love and be loved. The order is interesting. But of course, I cannot love until I have first been given that love by My Beautiful One. Proper order!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

387 **The writer's freedom**

To write without reference to anybody else's standard, without slavish conformity to literary convention or the idolatrous worship of the god of intellectual humbug, not to need anybody else's validation nor to crave publication and public acclaim, to write first and foremost for his own edification, enjoyment and relaxation: that is the writer's ultimate freedom, for then his work can truly nurture his spirit. Publication, if it should come in the fullness of time, will derive from a desire to nurture others, to share what has already blessed him, or from a similar, worthy motivation, rather than from the desire for adulation or approval, self-serving financial aggrandisement or the dubious rewards of fame. And I have that freedom. Some of the time – I'm only human after all!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

388 **Solitude**

I hadn't heard from Fred for several hours, nor he from me indeed, and silence reigned. Eventually, tiring of the lengthy interval during which we had remained unusually incommunicado, he piped, as you might say, up:

'You're very quiet today.'

I could tell from his conciliatory tone that he was lonely, anxious for a bit of company and a pleasant natter about this, that and, perhaps, a touch of the other.

'Yes, I am quiet,' I replied, 'and for a very good reason: I've got nothing to say.'

'Oh, I see!' he replied, somewhat put out.

'That's just it, old comrade-in-arms; you don't see at all. It's not that I have no desire to talk; I'd love a long, cosy tête-à-tête as a matter of fact. It's just that, well – like I said – I haven't got anything to say.'

'Hmmm! That's very odd,' he murmured pensively. 'Now that I come to think of it, and for some strange reason that I cannot readily identify, I haven't either!'

Silence reigned again.

(‘Solitude’, story in *Life With Fred*)

389 **When ‘telling lies’ is pure truth!**

I imagine most of us have come across people who make a virtue of saying it like it is in every situation – of not mincing their words and telling the ‘truth’ regardless of its effect on others. Many of us will have also witnessed the distress such behaviour can cause. Why? Because it is not as simple as it seems. To be able to offer a frank and truthful response, I need to be able to discern the *real* truth in the situation on which I propose to comment.

A simple example will suffice. A beloved aunt in her seventies rings me one day, says she is coming to town to buy a hat for a wedding and can she stay overnight with me? But of course; be delighted. She arrives in the morning time and, after a refreshing cup of tea, heads into town around midday, returning at 6pm exhausted but happy, hat box in hand. She takes off the lid, places it on her head and says, ‘Now, tell me honestly, what do you think?’ The hat in question is one of those creations sporting a bunch of artificial fruit, bird feathers and rabbits tails and is vividly coloured. So I reply, ‘Well, to be honest, dearest aunt, I think it is absolutely hideous.’ Instead of being thankful to me for honouring her request that I be honest, she is devastated by my reply and bursts into tears. Why? Because I did not hear what she said. Her words were, ‘Now, tell me honestly, what do you think?’ but what she was actually saying was, ‘I have traipsed all over town for six hours and eventually found a hat, for which I paid a small fortune, that I absolutely love, and I have come in here for you to tell me that you like it too.’ Therefore in discerning her *real* request and telling my aunt that her hat is absolutely beautiful and suits her to a tee, I can tell a lie and at the same time deal in pure truth. Wonderful, isn’t it? Also very spiritual.

Those who doggedly pursue the ‘I always call a spade a spade’ philosophy conjure up the image of a steamroller driver who is so obsessed with his calling that he steamrolls regardless of who or what is in his path and oblivious to the circumstances which placed them there.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

390 **Just for fun**

Each year, apparently, the *Washington Post's* Style Invitational asks readers to take any word from the dictionary, alter it by adding, subtracting, or changing *one* letter, and supplying a new definition. Here are two examples from 2003's winners to give you the idea:

1. *Intaxication*: Euphoria at getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realise it was your money to start with.
2. *Foreploy*: Any misrepresentation about yourself for the purpose of getting laid.

I decided to have a go myself, just for the fun of it. Here are some of the results:

- ✧ *Talculatation*: computation done while sprinkling oneself with fine powder.
- ✧ *Missgivings*: generous young lady.
- ✧ *Gratitube*: thankfulness at not being late for work because of missing the subway/metro.
- ✧ *Laftermath*: hiccups.
- ✧ *Pignificant*: adjective describing important member of the swine community.
- ✧ *Acropolid*: Greek farmer's hat.
- ✧ *Maelstrim*: chaos caused by men on a diet.
- ✧ *Gasshole*: malign proprietor of a petrol/gas station.
- ✧ *Bumbrik*: vehicle for bringing assholes to the gallows.

(From 'It's All In The Letter', a fun piece in *In My Write Mind*)

391 **What I am not, and what I do**

I am not a therapist, and it would be very wrong of me to say that I possess the requisite skills, so I don't attempt to make myself available in that way. All I ever do – and that is the purpose of the writing in this context – is share my own story in the hope that others may find something in it that will help them. And if not, there is no harm done because I have offered no guidance and given no advice.

(From a letter, May 2012)

392 **Good and bad people?**

Can a good person do bad things? None of us like to admit it but the answer is a resounding ‘Yes’. I defy anyone to show me a person who has never gone off the straight and narrow in one way or another. Perfection is not what the human condition is made of; that is not the way God created us.

Right then, everybody does bad things. How about the people who do *very* bad things? Here’s the answer: people who do fairly bad things will be okay, but people who do very bad things will be burnt in hell’s fire. Happy with that? No? Why not? Because if we are all capable of doing bad things, thereafter it is only a question of degree. How logical is it to say that a person who does fairly bad things is fundamentally good and a person who does very bad things is fundamentally bad? And where is the dividing line, and who judges? It doesn’t make sense, does it?

Let me repeat: only God can know the heart of any man or woman. I am very open to the notion that, at bottom, there are *no* bad people at all, only those who are fundamentally good, but whose actions have been perverted by conditioning, education, culture, history, trauma, illness (both physical and mental), genetic influences and any number of other factors.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

393 **All good things ...**

Normal mortals have some fears,
The writer too, it oft appears,
The worst of which is going dry,
And writing naught howe’er he try,
For even genius hits a low,
(Cause human beings ebb and flow);
Though typically a brief sensation,
At once replaced by inspiration;
But –
The final nightmare comes to stay,
When there’s nothing ... nothing ... left to say.

(‘The End’, poem in *Hang On!*)

394 **Bringing up children**

We were blessed with four children with less than six years between the oldest and youngest, and, like most parents, had virtually *no* training for the most important job on the planet. Nevertheless, they have all turned out wonderfully well. I decided to write down what lessons about being parents that my wife and I learned and tried to implement, which might be passed on to others. Please note that I said '*tried to implement*'. There is no such thing as the perfect parent. Indeed, the miracle is that our three sons and our daughter survived all our bungling and errors of judgement, to become beautiful human beings. For that we are truly grateful. Anyway, we came up with eight principal things:

1. **Love.** Let them know that they are loved for who they are, not for what they achieve. In other words, unconditional love, never 'I will love you if ...'. It is equally important that the parents show their love for each other in front of the children.
2. **Touch.** We always made a point of hugging our children every day. Even when a couple of them got a bit iffy about this during teenage, we still made a point of touching them, e.g. placing a hand on their shoulders or touching their forearms. Now in their thirties, they all still love the hugs. So, needless to say, do we! When my youngest son's wife was asked by her mother, early in their relationship, what we and the rest of the family were like, she responded spontaneously, 'Oh Mum, you're going to love them; they're always hugging!'
3. **Boundaries.** We are not born self-disciplined. Wholesome discipline has to be learned, hence taught. It is vital that children know what is acceptable and what is not. Equally, it is important that it is made clear to them in advance what the consequences of unacceptable behaviour will be. If we fail our children in this crucial matter, we are creating trouble down the line for them and heartache for ourselves.

4. **Listening.** We had to learn that listening is an active skill which takes effort and attention – it is a lot more than just hearing. Listen to the child, then be willing to consider what is said as objectively as possible. We found that, when we did this, they more than once had something to teach us, rather than the other way round.
5. **Truth.** Children have a great capacity to deal with the truth. If, for example, the family is going through a difficult period of any kind, tell them the truth – gently of course. They can handle it. If, instead, they get mixed messages (e.g. if you say there isn't a problem when there is), they get confused and upset.
6. **Example.** Of course we must give good advice to our children. They need to hear things from us that will stand them in good stead as they grow to maturity. But it is far more meaningful if they learn from our example. So, by all means *give* the message, but more importantly, *be* the message.
7. **United front.** When a child/adolescent/young adult needs to be taught something or confronted (e.g. about unacceptable behaviour), it is critical that they see clearly that the parents are united in their approach. If they perceive that this is not the case, they may play one off against the other and seek to divide for their own ends.
8. **Higher Values.** Most importantly, try to give them a vibrant sense of the spiritual that they can build on in later life. (See the essay 'Higher Values For Our Children?' in either *Beneath The Surface* or *Beyond The Rainbow*, extracts of which are given in this book.)

As I made clear at the start, we did not do all of this perfectly, not by any stretch of the imagination. We blundered around and made lots of mistakes, but we certainly did our best, and, looking at them now, we are tempted to believe that we must have done something right! Once again, there is no such thing as the perfect parent. So let Mum and Dad be content with progress not perfection – in this as, indeed, in everything.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

395 **For my wife**

A child once,
Many acres to choose from,
But the neglected corner patch became my garden.
I planted marigolds in it,
Always marigolds
And nothing else but marigolds,
Symbols of sunshine – of hope.
Single-minded you might say,
Not very adventurous,
But they represented the light of truth
From deep within me.

A man then,
Many relationships to choose from,
But your delicate, captivating spirit became my garden.
I planted love in it,
Always love
And nothing else but love,
Symbol of passion – of tenderness.
Single-minded you might say,
Not very adventurous,
But it represented the light of truth
From deep within me.

An old man now,
And still a gardener
For, until the last breath leaves my body,
And from deep within me,
I will plant marigolds
In your heart.

(‘Marigolds’, poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

396 **A word to myself about understanding**

Don’t spoil or limit your transcendently beautiful spirituality by trying to understand it. If you absolutely must, understand *that* it is so, not *why* or *how* it is so. In this context, that is the correct use of understanding.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

397 **A shaky attempt to keep Fred in his place!**

If there is one thing that I have learned from a lifetime of experience with Fred, it's that he has got to be kept in his place, and on this occasion I reckon I did a pretty good job. You can see, dear reader, can't you, how I nearly got carried away with his loony pipe dream about writing a bestselling novel? No wonder I have such trouble in my inner territories from time to time. But one thing is certain: keeping Fred on the straight and narrow has taught me many valuable lessons ... Look, I'd really like to share them with you, but the truth of the matter is that I'm extremely busy just now, so perhaps some other time. I have to get down to writing this novel. Now, where's my notebook?

(From 'No Self-Delusion?', story in *Life With Fred*)

398 **Gentleness**

'My beloved father and mother were obliged to emigrate to the neighbouring island in order to earn their daily bread, so that I was educated *a l'anglaise*, so to speak. One of the outcomes of this circumstance was that I had no formal grounding in the Irish language, my present, scant knowledge of it gleaned from my children and news bulletins over the years. Therefore you will not be surprised to learn, Lucille, that in my early years I did not know how the O'Sullivan family motto – *Lámh Foisteanach Abú* – translated into English. In late teenage, a distant relative informed me that it means *The strong hand to victory*, after which I more or less dumped it in terms of it having any significance in my life, as I have never considered myself the warrior type and would certainly not regard strength one of my strong points, if you'll forgive the play on words.

'It is only in recent months I discovered that I was misinformed and that, in reality, our family motto means *The steady or gentle hand to victory*, which puts a totally different complexion on it. Gentleness is one of the qualities I most revere – when I can find it.'

(From 'Gentle Hands', story in *Life With Lucille*)

399 **The complaint that hotel managers dread**

‘Look here,’ I said to the customer services manager. ‘My son and I stayed in your blasted hotel last night and, while the general standards and service were up to scratch (if, in the light of the information I am about to impart, you will pardon the play on words), I didn’t sleep a wink. I was bitten alive by a flea or fleas – at least that, in the absence of any other explanation, is the only conclusion I can come to, as scorpions, mosquitoes and similar parasites are thankfully rare on this part of the planet. Nevertheless the incumbent little monsters must have mastered the technology of tunnelling since I last encountered their machinations in my far-distant youth, because my entire body is, as of even date, punctured with small holes. Despite a relentlessly pursued campaign, based broadly on the tactics employed by the elite of the world’s best-trained commandos, I was unable to ascertain whether the little blighter(s) was/were in the singular or plural and my attempts to apprehend and exterminate it/them met with abysmal failure. Your kettle and help-yourself sachets provided a temporary palliative but fell short of providing surrogate slumber. Indeed the frustration-induced quantities of coffee that I consumed between skirmishes only served to exacerbate the absence of a solid, comatose relationship with the mattress ...’

(From ‘The Unfinished Story’, story in *In My Write Mind*)

400 **How to start a scandal in one easy lesson**

I entered the town’s most popular public house, and surveyed the mass of imbibing humanity, searching the crowded room for the girl I had to come to meet. Would she be here? Would I recognise her? Then I espied her at a cosy table in the far corner, waiting patiently for me. Relieved, I waded in obvious enthusiasm and, in my pleasure at seeing her, called out loudly – but, in hindsight, unwisely: ‘Gosh, you look terrific; I hardly knew you. I don’t know what my wife would say; that’s the first time I’ve seen you with your clothes on ...’

(From ‘Dressed For The Occasion’, story in *In My Write Mind*)

401 **Nothing lasts forever – or does it?**

‘Lucille, a morbid and disturbing notion has been presenting itself to my mind for reflection in the past few days, and morbid and disturbing notions are never my first choice when I’m in the mood for a bit of reflection. But this particular notion was most insistent, so I had to reflect on it or it would have annoyed me until I did. I’ll give it to you in a nutshell: in due course, I shall pen my last line, cash in my chips, and kick the proverbial bucket. Snuffing it is inevitable of course but, being steadfast, ever faithful and hopeful of a blissful hereafter, one accepts the inevitable with a sort of resigned and cautious optimism, does one not? However, what really causes me sorrow and chagrin is the thought that you, my esteemed and devoted goddess, will simply move on to your next assignment, and I will become but a fading memory, but a little-known writer who, for a few years, provided a humble vehicle to fulfil the requirements of your high calling, but one further addition to your long tally of authors and authoresses. This, my dearest Lucille, is a most depressing thought.’

Lucille did not reply. Almost immediately I sensed the lump in her throat and the unshed tears in her eyes, and reverence for a poignant moment kept us both in a state of silence for quite some time.

(From ‘Prelude To Paradise’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

402 **Writing soothes**

Anyway I sipped my coffee, nibbled the chocolate chip cookies, and scribbled on about the variety of stuff I have penned over the years, marvelled at the way the novel *Black On Magenta* came into existence out of the blue, pondered on my all-time favourite poem *The Dance Of Forever*, turned over in my mind some of the hundreds of reflections stored in *Perspectives*, and laughed at the many funny incidents recorded in *Life With Lucille* and *Life With Fred*. The whole process lulled me into a sort of reverie, a pleasant state of cerebral inertia, in which the vicissitudes of life ... were temporarily suspended.

(From ‘Wakey, Wakey!’, story in *Life With Fred*, Vol. 2)

403 **Lucille meet Fred?**

‘How’s Fred keeping these days? I haven’t heard you mention him lately.’

‘Oh, er ... he’s fine Lucille, thanks, just fine. Same old Fred, you know – sometimes comforting, sometimes caustic, frequently cranky, but always in residence. We’re sort of stuck with each other.’

‘I’d like to meet him. From what I know of him, he sounds fascinating. You must introduce us sometime.’

‘Er ... yes, I must, mustn’t I?’

To my surprise, this request jarred on me quite considerably, and I wasn’t quite sure why. Then it hit me: I wanted Lucille all to myself; didn’t want Fred muscling in on a perfect friendship ...

(From ‘Keep Your Distance’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

404 **The concept of averageness**

Perfectionism is a heavy burden to bear, because it requires of me that I get it all right all the time – or else! This can feel like a life sentence. The answer is to embrace and internalise the idea of being average. Many people would not go along with this. I mean, who wants to be just average? The mistake here is to think that averageness is the same as mediocrity. Not so. Mediocrity is a state in which one does everything in a lacklustre fashion with not much to write home about. An average, on the other hand is arrived at by adding everything from high to low – you know the formula. So then with each person. There are things at which we excel, things we do very well, things we do well, things we do fairly poorly, things we do very poorly, and many things we cannot do at all. That’s what average people are like. But perfectionism demands that we excel at everything. Hence the resulting heartache, stress and self-criticism when we fail. Averageness is a much healthier concept for living. It means I can accept with gratitude the things at which I excel or do well, and accept with fortitude the things which I do poorly or cannot do at all.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

405 **Honesty pays!**

I was toying with the whimsical idea, fostered by an offbeat sense of humour, of trying to be clever and edit the pieces in this book – with appropriate, though contrived, scholarly commentaries – into an order which would suggest that I have evolved a cohesive and masterly theory on the writer’s art, a vital message for aspiring and practising scribblers. But that would be dishonest and while I undoubtedly possess a fair number of character flaws, dishonesty is certainly not one of them. I have no theory, no message for the writing world, beyond this: if you want to write, write – and write *primarily* for yourself. Thus I abandoned the cohesive theory scheme in favour of a much simpler strategy, namely, with a few exceptions, to present the pieces I have selected for inclusion in *When The Bug Bites* in alphabetical order, and leave it at that.

(From the Introduction to *When The Bug Bites*)

406 **Linguistic manipulation**

I am almost certain that I have written about this before but I cannot find it despite a diligent search. Well, it bears repeating!

It has often struck me that if one is skilled enough in the art of rhetoric, and particularly adept at manipulating language and concepts, one can justify almost anything. That is one of the reasons why, as I have mentioned elsewhere, I have become very wary of anybody who is described as or who describes themselves as a spiritual teacher. Indeed, I am much more wary of almost everything I read or hear. Wary, please note, not cynical. In the world in which we live, prudence is a decided advantage. When I cannot decipher if a clever exposé is for me, I rely on my intuition. On occasions when my intuition doesn’t offer a nudge, I just avoid making a decision or drawing a conclusion unless it is absolutely necessary.

Many times, I have seen or heard impressively cogent arguments justifying the most arrant nonsense. Some of this is funny or bizarre, some of it distressing, some of it highly dangerous, as history shows.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

407 **Spirituality in my own childhood**

It occurs to me that it may be of interest to my reader for me to answer the question: how was my own childhood in this regard? To preface my answer, I believe it is worth mentioning that I was an only child; after me, my mother had three miscarriages and a stillborn child.

My father abandoned his faith as a teenager and never practised it; my mother was constantly in poor health from when I was three, and I cannot recall her ever coming to church with me ...

For whatever reason, at a very early age, I had a sense of let's call it a 'Higher Presence' and went to church by myself because I liked what I found there. Much later again, I discovered a stupendously beautiful spirituality, much of which has been recorded in my writings. So, you see, my mum and dad laid an invaluable foundation for me and gave me a priceless heritage.

(From 'Higher Values For Our Children?',
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

408 **Who needs reasons?**

The reason for this latest, eclectic collection is ... actually there isn't a reason. What poet needs an excuse to produce yet another volume of his work? And what cause have you to moan about it: 'Oh no, not more of his bloody poems'? This, as all my privately produced editions, is given away free. Philanthropist, that's me. Anyway, you don't have to read it, although these little volumes do cost a bit to produce, so I'd appreciate it if you at least made an effort. Humour me, in other words. Failing that, give it back so I can foist it on some other unsuspecting victim.

The title of the book, *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*, is taken from the last line of the first poem in the collection, 'The Tightrope Walker'. Apart from being an interesting title for a book of poems, it expresses a heartfelt, personal prayer!

(From the Introduction to *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

409 **Abundance?**

All this prompts me to ... consider something that bothers me considerably. There are many self-help books, internet sites, online seminars – or webinars as they are now called – to help people achieve success. Time after time, the main goal is to achieve ‘Abundance’ (A copious supply; a great amount – *Collins Dictionary*). Implicit, and sometimes overtly stated, in these endeavours, is the belief that the world, properly ordered, can provide everybody with abundance. This is utter nonsense. We are squandering the planet’s limited resources at an alarming rate, and future generations may well pay an enormous price for our profligacy.

(From ‘Success And Failure’, essay in
Reality And Illusion & Other Essays)

410 **A compliment from Fred – and a writer’s freedom**

‘I think you are absolutely wonderful,’ said Fred warmly.

‘My Goodness! Thank you, Fred,’ I replied, a little taken aback at his unsolicited effusiveness. ‘So do I. But pray tell, what brought on this miniature tidal wave of approval?’

‘It struck me recently that you are, in many ways, a rather reclusive type of writer and keep much of your output safely tucked away in the archives at the family mansion. However, in seeming contradiction, you have given oodles of the stuff away as well. How much would you say?’

‘Ah, now there you have me, Fred. I haven’t kept a tally but I reckon there must be over two thousand of my privately produced books in circulation plus any amount of individual pieces, also any God’s number of the electronic versions of the books, plus a small number of audio tapes.’

‘But what’s even more impressive,’ Fred went on, ‘is that you always give them away unconditionally, making it clear to the recipients that they should feel under no obligation to comment on or respond to your writing in any way. Terrific that!’

‘Terrific,’ I agreed. ‘It gives me great freedom.’

(From ‘No Self-Delusion?’, story in *Life With Fred*)

411 **Definitely not Christmas**

Good Morning;
This is your friendly radio station.
Here is the News:

One war a-brewing,
Two turtle doves shot down by hostile aircraft,
Three strikes about to screw up the country,
Four petrol-pump attendants murdered in cold blood,
Five thousand gold ingots stolen from Fort Knox,
Six maids assaulted,
Seven serious frauds uncovered,
Eight French hens exported in contravention of UN sanctions,
Nine politicians sacked for corruption,
Ten sex scandals exposed,
Eleven innocent bystanders massacred
 by an obscure separatist group,
Twelve companies gone bust because of the usual excuses ...

(From 'Morning Sickness', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

412 **A loved mentor**

During the year after your father died [of which I was unaware at the time], I wrote to Downside to enquire if he was still alive as, even though many years had passed, I wanted to write to him to say a big 'thank you' for giving me a love of English (he taught me for my entire sojourn at the school) and much more besides. On one occasion he invited the class to tea with him and your mother, in his home. This, I think, was most unusual in those days. On the walk back to the school with a classmate, we both remarked that it was palpably evident that your mum and dad loved and respected each other very much. Sixteen year old youths, I imagine, are not usually noted for observing such things! So, unknown to him, he taught me a precious lesson about marital love. With hindsight, I now realise that he is one of the three men who most influenced me for good in my life. He was a loving and lovable man.

(From a letter, June 2006)

413 **Now, that's love!**

'Pray, tell me this,' she said.
 'What shall I tell?' I said
'If you were lonely?' she said.
 'I'm never lonely,' I said.
'But did you miss me?' she said.
 'I always miss you,' I said.
'But you weren't lonely?' she said.
 'No, I wasn't lonely,' I said.
'How can that be?' she said.
 'How can what be?' I said.
'That you always miss me,' she said.
 'Oh, that I do,' I said.
'But you're never lonely,' she said.
 'Yes, that's quite right,' I said.
'It's such a mystery,' she said.
 'No, not at all,' I said.
'I own I'm puzzled,' she said.
 'It's really simple,' I said.
'Then tell me, do,' she said.
 'When I'm alone,' I said.
'When you're alone?' she said.
 'When you're not here,' I said.
'When I'm not here?' she said.
 'Your love's still with me,' I said.
'Aah! Now I see,' she said.
 'It always lingers,' I said.
'It always lingers?' she said.
 'Just like a fragrance,' I said.
 She softly sighed,
 She sweetly smiled,
 And then she kissed me.

(*'Just Like A Fragrance'*,
poem in *Voice Of The Man-child*)

414 **Celebrating one's uniqueness**

It was lovely talking to you again today. I just found the substance of our discussion so comforting, namely acknowledging being different and coming to be comfortable with that – learning to honour my uniqueness and not trying to force myself into society's homogenised mould, or feel guilty at times when I don't 'fit in'. Actually, I have almost no desire to fit in, and it's taken me over sixty years to get to that point! I am making a decision to celebrate my uniqueness from now on, not shove it in other people's faces, indeed anything but that, rather to celebrate it quietly deep inside myself.

(From a letter, November 2004)

415 **Slow down**

Elsewhere,* I have cited a piece of intelligence from a Bell Laboratories report from some years ago, which is relevant to the topic I wish to deal with here. It stated that, in one day's edition of the *New York Times*, there is more information than the average man or woman had to process in the whole of his or her life in the sixteenth century. More recently, I read that It is estimated that by 1900 human knowledge was doubling every century. Now, some informed commentators are saying that we are not too far from the point where knowledge will double every 12 hours.

Depending on one's viewpoint, this is fascinating, mid-boggling or scary. What interests me, however, is the effect it is having on ordinary men and women like you and me. For two hundred thousand years, the length of time modern humans are estimated to have been on Earth, we have been evolving organically. Now, particularly with the mushrooming of digital technology (which is largely responsible for the information explosion) we are being forced to try and evolve exponentially, and we are failing dismally. Since the Industrial Revolution, and especially since the advent of mainstream digital technology – and I am particularly concerned about the possibilities of artificial intelligence – the rate at which we are

required to function has gone from fast, to faster, to manic. And what is the purpose of this vastly increased momentum? I have no idea. What I do know is that the more rapidly we travel, the more ground we cover, but the less we see of the beautiful landscape through which we are passing; it all becomes a blur. So, then, in life.

Simply put, we were not designed to live at the speed and under the pressures that are being demanded of us in the twenty-first century. We are already paying a huge price in terms of poorer health and well-being and social dysfunction, and unless we control this insane onrush before it controls us, the negative fallout may well become unmanageable. What should we do about it? I have nothing to suggest. But much brighter intellects than mine had better set their minds to the issue and then convincingly propose effective remedies to the world's influencers. Before it's too late.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See 'Too much information', piece 219 on page 106.

416 **Fred has it better than me**

'I've just got the results of those tests from the doctor, Fred.'

'And ...' he said, with a mixture of eagerness and apprehension.

'They're all clear, old buddy, all clear. We're as fit as a fiddle – or two fiddles, depending on how one looks at it.'

'Wonderful,' cried Fred exuberantly. 'Great news.'

'Couldn't agree more, but one thing remains unexplained.'

'And what's that?'

'Why I'm still feeling so rotten physically – pains, strains and aches, pangs, twinges and spasms, lassitude, fatigue and so forth.'

'You're right,' agreed Fred. 'It doesn't explain that, does it? On the other hand, seeing that I don't have a body – well yours is mine, I suppose, but for all practical purposes I'm bodiless – I have to say that I feel pretty good all round myself.'

(From 'Where There's Life ...', story in *Life With Fred*)

417 **No rehearsal**

I try to take life one day at a time, sometimes one moment at a time, and it takes practice. If I constantly dwell in the past or project into the future, I will never be content *now*. Life isn't a rehearsal. This is it.

I heard one person put it somewhat crudely but succinctly: 'If I live with one foot in yesterday and the other foot in tomorrow, I will piddle on today.'

(From *Living With The Blues*)

418 **Privacy or prostitution?**

It seems to me, from what I observe in the world around me, that there have never been more channels of communication available to us, and never been less *real* connection between people. Never has the technology of communication been more sophisticated nor the art of communication more impoverished. The supply of information is increasing exponentially. We are producing more and more words and images, but, as a proportion of the total output, saying less and less of true, enduring, life-giving worth. Why? I believe it's because we are creating such an immense amount of information, both outside and inside ourselves, and have failed to evolve adequate strategies to separate the essential from the staggering quantities of the unessential, so that, all too often, we lose sight of what we really want and need to say – in our own inner environment as well as to others. The art of communication is, first and foremost, about giving direct, unequivocal messages to *ourselves*. If we cannot do that, what we share with others will, at best be unclear, and may even be ambivalent, false or even destructive, often without our being aware of that fact.

When one couples the communications technology explosion with what one might call the twenty-first century social ethos, where everything is open for discussion, nothing held back, all is laid bare for public consumption and you are considered unbalanced, or at least unsociable, if you're reticent – if you value your privacy in other words – you have the

formula for what I call the prostitution of the mind and the spirit. Aided and abetted by the twin influences of invasive technology and social over-exposure, the most private, personal and tender of communications have been unethically, indeed virtually amorally, hijacked by greedy commercial interests in order to sell everything from peanuts to pornography.

John O'Donohue* said that the secret and the sacred are sisters. In exposing our secrets to the voyeuristic gaze of the world, we have sold our sacredness into slavery. Sadly, many people do not realise they have done this, simply because it is so common. But one of the greatest mistakes we can make is to assume that what is common, what the majority do, is normal and wholesome. If, however, we can come to a conscious awareness that we have taken a wrong turning, and become willing to take a new direction, the road to reclaiming our sacredness is the most important journey we will make in this life.

Do I have solidly researched evidence to prove what I have just said? No. Not necessary. If, for a given period, we will just look around and within us, with an open mind, a perceptive eye and a discerning ear, we will uncover all the evidence we require. Then, maybe, we might change course, say what we really need to say and hear what we really need to hear, thereby restoring and nurturing our spirits and the spirits of others, like never before.

Come to think of it, if we engage in a process of distillation and confine ourselves to the essentials, there is very little we need to hear and even less we need to say. Although I will almost certainly continue to say – or rather write – a considerable amount, since I am allowed to be human, and writing is my sanity! That is perfectly okay – as long as I do not stray too far from the messages which emanate from what I call the indestructible essence at the core of my being. And guard my sacred secrets with the utmost care.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* In *Anam Cara – Spiritual Wisdom From The Celtic World* (1997), Chapter 3 'Solitude is Luminous'.

419 **What is a worthwhile occupation?**

Where I have to be very vigilant is not even to entertain a judgement as to what constitutes a worthwhile occupation and what does not. It would be very easy for me to think, for example, that a field worker with a voluntary organisation who is daily helping the most underprivileged is doing something immensely worthwhile, whereas an ego-driven pop idol who earns fortunes from one song is only one step above a parasite. The truth of the matter, in this example, is that it is often while I am listening to a popular song that I have the most profound sense of the presence of the God Of My Life in various ways. These singers have no idea how much they have helped me ...

I have to be careful not to make the same judgements about my own life. Bringing my wife a cup of tea in bed in the morning could, at times, be vastly more important than preparing a new course on personal development that has the potential to help many people. Charity begins at home ...

Now, if you'll excuse me, I am not going to write any more of this stuff for now. I have something more important to do. My small garden needs weeding, and that is a very worthwhile pursuit indeed, even fulfilling when I see the fruits of my labours, namely God's gifts of Nature blossoming unimpeded!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

420 **The light of love**

Moving toward a conclusion to this introduction, I would like to draw your attention to an unplanned aspect of the title of the book: the first letters of *Love Is The Essence* make up the acronym LITE. Light is a word – a concept – which I associate very closely with My God, with infinite, steadfast, unconditional love. Every time I sit down at the table, even just for a casual cup of tea, and at many other times as well, I light a symbolic candle or two. I was delighted when I spotted this happy 'coincidence'.

(From the Introduction to *Love Is The Essence*)

421 **Baby rules okay!**

The mite emits its loudest yell,
Of decibels unknowing;
Egocentric, all ignoring,
And the focus of attention,
Wants it's bottle, willy-nilly.
So they strap it in a high chair,
And proceed to pay it homage
In the timeworn way of parents,
All oblivious to the din.

(From 'Homage To A Future Hero', poem in
Homage To A Future Hero)

422 **The Muse of Muses**

'I was just thinking, Lucille, what an amazing life you have had. Faithfully and professionally, you have ministered to around one hundred and seventy writers, giving them inspiration, encouragement and – in my case – much more besides. In addition you have weathered the monumental changes in language, culture, anthropology and technology for well-nigh three thousand years, and managed to stay on top of nearly all of it. What's more, you have participated in your divine duties with fellow deities with exemplary wisdom and fortitude, patiently tolerated generations of the misinformed who have described you and your family and colleagues as "myths" and still come up smiling. Quite extraordinary really. Of course one expects such exalted things from a goddess, and you have never failed those who love and respect you. You deserve an achievement award.'

(From 'Bless Us', story in *Life With Lucille*)

423 **Self-love – prerequisite for loving others**

I cannot give life-giving water to others, especially to those in great need of it, if my own well has run dry. First I must replenish my own supply.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

424 **The Lotto – or a spiritual awakening?**

Imagine I am addressing a diverse group of, say, fifty people. For a while I deal with various topics which elicit more or less interest from my audience. Then I say, ‘Now I have good news for you: I have an infallible formula for winning the Lotto. I will share it with you so that each one of you here will win in the next year.’ Would one or two people show interest, and the rest wish I would move on to the next topic? Of course not! All eyes would open wide in amazement, and would be excited, only waiting for me to spill out the formula. Why? Simply because, even if they have never had wealth, they can observe the lifestyles of the wealthy in the world around them, and speculate how wonderful it would be for them to have a similar lifestyle.

Suppose instead, I say, ‘Now I have good news for you: I know how you can all acquire a spiritual awakening, so that instead of having to just *believe*, you will come to *know* the infinite, steadfast, unconditional love of the God deep in your being.’ Would they be all wide-eyed and excited? My guess is that one or two might express some interest, but the rest would yawn and wish I would move on to a more interesting topic, or at least stop evangelising! Why? Because, unlike the Lotto, where one does not have to have won it in order to visualise the life it would confer, one can only appreciate the stupendous wonder of a spiritual awakening *after* one has experienced it – when one might say, ‘How is it that I didn’t always long for this?’

How I wish there were some way of showing the miracle to people in advance so that they could yearn for something that is infinitely more valuable than all the Lottos put together. I often use a quotation from the poet John Keats, and it is certainly apropos here: *Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced.*

Mind you, I would still like to win the Lotto! But only in order to reduce my children’s mortgages and help some friends in need. For myself, I have enough.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

425 **Where poetry scores**

I have often written of the inadequacy of language when speaking of things spiritual, and there are two poems in *From The Cradle Of Eternity* which take up this theme. However, to borrow from the Addendum in my personal copy of *The Substance Of Dreams*:

... poetic form does seem to give a subtle and eloquent expression to thoughts and feelings that prose or the meaning of the individual words is incapable of doing.

(From the Introduction to *From The Cradle Of Eternity*)

426 **Gentle surrender**

The turning point came
When you broke my delusion,
Enfolded me in your embrace,
And showed me that I am loved without limits
And my life is surrounded by grace.
How soft I surrendered then my way to yours,
To your gentle and loving design;
And the thought comes that since I've no way of my own,
Then your way must surely be mine.

(From 'Whose Way?', poem in *From The Cradle Of Eternity*)

427 **Of a sister who didn't make it into the world ...**

When you were, in love, conceived,
Was part of me engendered;
The core of me surrendered
To the blending of our spirits,
And the union thus created
Transcended time and space.
But when you died
E'er breath was drawn,
Your life uncelebrated,
That part of me died with you ...

(From 'Oneness', poem in *From The Cradle Of Eternity*)

428 **A reminder prayer**

*See, that's the effect you have on me:
Once glimpsed, forever enamoured,
And I cannot live without you.*

(From 'Kick Start', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

I know you don't need to be reminded, God of my heart, but I do: I have only one strategy for dealing with everything in my life, and I mean *everything*, and that's to keep looking to you, just keep on looking to you. Nothing else works. There is no plan B. Many secular remedies offer, at best, a temporary solution (although I readily acknowledge that you often use secular methods to help us, for they are your gift too), and self-propulsion is a disaster. So once more, just in case I forget, I keep looking to you.

And because I only have one strategy, I get very upset when it appears not to be working, in those times when you seem neither to listen nor to respond, or worse when circumstances create the pernicious illusion that you have abandoned me. When that happens, there is only one thing to do: keep looking to you.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

429 **What's in a name?**

'Silly bitch!

'I beg your pardon?'

'Oh gosh, not you, Lucille. I meant the half-brained switchboard operator I was just talking to on the phone. I think you will concede that, in Ireland, O'Sullivan is a pretty common name (common, you understand, in the sense of frequently occurring) and that 'Ken' isn't entirely unheard of either. I gave the name of the person to whom I wished to speak and she asked, as is the custom, if she might say who was calling. Not wishing to keep her in the dark, I told her; yet when I articulated my name with perfect diction, she said 'What?', not even 'Pardon?'

(From 'Caught In The Crossfire', story in *Life With Lucille*)

430 **Having a go at Fred**

‘It’s all very fine for you, Fred. You just sort of hitchhike around in my head, like some penniless, backpacking holidaymaker, who suddenly gets picked up by the philanthropic owner of a Rolls Royce, getting transported everywhere, having your every need gratified, somewhat reminiscent of Cleopatra on her barge, Boadicea on her horse or Aladdin on a magic carpet provided by that genie of his. Yes that’s it! I’m your genie; I do all the work, fetch and carry, polish and clean, maintain the family dwelling, drive the car, be a husband to my wife, a father to my children, a shepherd to my college flock, bring home the bacon, not to mention the crust of bread, carry our past-its-prime body everywhere, and you just lay back there and sort of let it all happen, like some decadent Roman emperor constantly having his every desire pandered to by tireless slaves, nubile maidens and all that sort of stuff. And if that wasn’t unbalanced and unfair enough, you don’t seem to appreciate one bit of it. You’re constantly sniping at me, teasing me unfeelingly and generally, hither and thither, making yourself nauseatingly objectionable and taking your whole luxurious and carefree lot for bloody well granted.’

(From ‘Mission’, story in *Life With Fred*)

431 **Disorganised**

I am getting more disorganised as the days go by ... I don’t know how the heck I ever found time for full-time employment! I have so many projects (many of them writing ones) I would like to accomplish that I shall need at least two further lifetimes to get through them all. On second thoughts, one lifetime – down here that is – will do! There have been countless blessings and many achievements, but also much turmoil, so enough is enough. I will have to carry out the unaccomplished projects in a higher place. Actually this would probably be a better proposition as I doubt if there are any literary critics in heaven!

(From a letter, April 2004)

432 **Knowing my place**

My only thought in the morning mist
Of body, mind and soul,
Is my pressing engagement, my dawntime tryst
With you – to make me whole,
To take my hand, to take my heart,
To take my very essence,
Transform and mould, then draw apart
In the mystery of your presence:
A gentle kiss, a soft embrace,
A single, tender glance,
That I may know, with mystic grace,
The wonder of life's dance.
And so these hours are rich and rare,
My life with love imbue,
A daily proof that I know where
I'll always be ... with you.

(‘Sacred Tryst’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

433 **What do I most need from God?**

The answer is so clear to me that it scarcely needs to be said: Love. People talk of God's power, mercy and other qualities, but all these are but expressions of his love or, to put it in other words, ways in which God channels his love to me. I have written elsewhere that God never forgives me, simply because he hasn't condemned me in the first place; but he does respect the fact that I sometime feel the need for forgiveness when I have gone off track, so he channels his love to me in the form of forgiveness to meet my need. As another example, when I cannot do something I need to do, he relays his love to me in the guise of empowerment. Likewise, acceptance, gratitude and more. See, it's all about his meeting our daily *needs*, not necessarily our wants.

So, I have been wondering recently which of the ways in which God transmits his love to me do I most need, or does it vary from time to time according to the circumstances? For a while now, I have thought that hope was top of the list. I have

even said on occasion, 'I can't live without hope.' The more I think of it, however, and more importantly, the more I look back over the experience of a lifetime, I am drawn to the conclusion that the way in which I most need God to relay his love to me is in the gift of trust. Traditional teaching, warped it would seem by hundreds of years of misrepresentation – what I sometimes call the 'conditionalisation' of unconditional love – says that trust (by which I mean trusting God in *all* things) is something which I have to dredge up from the depths of my own finite resources, and only then will God grant me ... whatever. The truth is that I don't have *any* finite resources. Everything I have, down to the very next breath, comes from him. So, if I am to have trust in God in all things, that is a gift that must come from him. And since it's a gift, I do well to ask for it on a daily basis. My basic needs are always provided for, but, for reasons I do not fully understand, in other things God waits to be asked.

Why do I now think that trust is the most important manifestation of God's love in my life? It's because, even if hope falters or temporarily disappears, and even if I lose sight of the eternal, what I term the indestructible essence at the core of my being *always knows that fundamentally all is well here and hereafter*, even when I am not consciously aware of that reality. That, when all is said and done, is what trust is. Put another way, my solid experience is that when I am in the eye of the storm and cannot trust despite my best efforts, God does the trusting for me. This is the measure of how loved I am. Now, *that* is a gift.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

434 **When times are hard, don't listen to the lie**

Oh God! It's clear and now I see:
I'm punished just for being me ...
Or thus it seems to finite eyes –
A nightmare fate – yet all but lies.
Don't listen!

(From 'Don't Listen', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

435 **Getting sense**

'I enjoyed the celebration well enough, Fred, but getting home at five in the morning is ridiculous. I definitely need our head examined. On the other hand, we haven't done anything like that for twenty years. Nevertheless, I don't intend to repeat the performance; in balance, fellow reveller and reluctant partygoer, early to bed and early to rise, that's the policy from now on.'

(From 'Hangover', story in *Life With Fred*)

436 **Reminiscing – and a sublime compliment**

'When I was a boy growing up on the neighbouring island, Lucille, there was a programme on BBC radio every Sunday entitled *Desert Island Discs*. Celebrities were asked to select eight records they would bring with them if they were to become castaways on a desert island.'

'What a lovely idea for a programme.'

'Yes; and a lovely programme it was indeed. I rarely missed it. I don't know why it should have crossed my mind again after all these years; but cross my mind it did, and only this morning. I fell to wondering what records I would bring with me in those circumstances. A touch of Beethoven, no doubt; a soupçon of Haydn and Schubert, a smidgen of Tanya Tucker, a sprinkling of José Carreras, a dash or two of the Beatles, Elvis possibly, 'The Prayer' by Celine Dion and Andrea Bocelli and, I need hardly add, a liberal dose of Julio Iglesias. What would you bring, cherished Muse – a selection of sixteenth-century Madrigals?'

'No.'

'I know nothing of ancient Greek music. Did you have lyres, lutes and that sort of thing in those days? Perhaps you could get some modern exponent of early music to record an ancient ditty or two, and bring those with you?'

'No.'

'Well, Bach, Mozart or Saint-Saëns perhaps?'

'No.'

‘Ah I’ve got it. Through your contact with me, hence with the society in which I am immersed, you’ve developed a taste for the music of the twentieth century. A solid portfolio of rock and roll and some easy listening?’

‘No.’

‘Jazz?’

‘No.’

‘Good ole country music, then?’

‘No.’

Inspiration struck. ‘I’ve got it: a collection of sacred choral music?’

‘No.’

‘Well, I’m blowed if I know. There can’t be much left,’ I said, becoming a trifle exasperated. ‘What in heaven’s name would you bring?’

‘If I were marooned on a desert island,’ said Lucille, a dreamy look stealing over her delicate features, ‘I would just bring you.’

(‘Just For The Record’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

437 **God’s ability to treat each one of us uniquely**

Indeed, if there are seven billion people on the planet, he is totally capable of offering seven billion perceptions of himself – seven billion pathways if you prefer – to lead each person to the one indivisible truth. Naturally, I don’t fully understand this; I just know it without needing to understand it.

As one devotee of the Hindu mystic, Amma, put it:

Many rivers flow into one sea. All forms of worship culminate in one truth, the truth which cannot be divided.

Put another way, all those who turn to God with a sincere heart are, I believe, tuned into the one God, but not tuned into him on the same wavelength. He has a unique wavelength for each person, even for each person within a particular religious denomination.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

438 **No persuasion – just give it a try**

In keeping with the thrust of this piece, I have no desire to win you over by means of intellectual argument. Therefore I shall simply proceed with a question based on a pertinent quotation:

There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance – that principle is contempt prior to investigation.

(Herbert Spencer)

And now the question: have you given a *genuine, sustained and unbiased* trial to the realm of the spirit? If you have *truly* exerted yourself along these lines and found the process fruitless, I have nothing further to say beyond suggesting that a renewed quest might well produce an entirely different result. If you have not, what have you got to lose by making an honest endeavour to verify if there is something to be discovered, the existence of which you have hitherto believed to be impossible? Nobody else but you has to know that you have embarked on this inner journey. The only thing you may need, after an appropriate period of time, is the humility to acknowledge that your previous position is no longer tenable. For a couple of years in the early 1990s, I believed absolutely nothing; worse, I was certain that there was nothing to be believed. It all turned out to be a pernicious illusion which was replaced by a stupendously beautiful awakening to a divine presence beyond the dreams of a thousand lifetimes. That sounds like an exaggeration but it is not. And, over twenty years on, this presence has *never* left me, even in the darkest hours.

(From 'Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II',
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

439 **Only love**

Here are some of my favourite quotations on love:

- ✧ In the end everything will be love. (Julian of Norwich)
- ✧ God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall. (Julian of Norwich)
- ✧ My vocation, at last I have found it ... my vocation is love. (Thérèse of Lisieux)
- ✧ The good God has always treated me like a spoiled child ... he has always made me desire whatever he wanted to give me. (Thérèse of Lisieux)
- ✧ Do not be afraid to love; without love, life is impossible. (Thich Nhất Hanh)
- ✧ God hugs you. You are encircled by the arms of the mystery of God. (Hildegard of Bingen)
- ✧ Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence. (Erich Fromm)
- ✧ In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love. (Mother Teresa)
- ✧ God, please show me how much you love me; don't tell me; please show me. (A prayer of my own.)
- ✧ Prayer, my beloved one, is our love shared. (In response to my question: What is prayer? – from *Perspectives*.)
- ✧ The soul's progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much. (Teresa of Ávila)
- ✧ 'It's true,' he said softly after a while. 'It really is true. Love is all there is.' (From the novel *Black On Magenta*.)

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

440 **Fortieth wedding anniversary**

I thought I'd mark our fortieth
By writing something clever;
But there's only one thing to be said:
We're more in love than ever.

(‘Ruby’, poem in *Overdoing It!*)

441 **The rebellion fails!**

To hail the advent of my latest poem,
I thought a worthy sonnet I'd compose;
The only trouble is, I never cease
To turn out useless poetry and prose.
I rarely seem to grasp the rules of metre,
Or put the rhyming in its proper place.
The task, for me, would be a whole lot neater
If I could say my piece, at my own pace.
So, I'm going to shun all literary convention,
Express it in the way I best profess,
And from such frameworks claim a just exemption;
To be quite clear, there's something I should stress:
 Insist upon a sonnet, if you dare;
 I refuse to write a single one – so there!

(‘The Reluctant Sonnet’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

442 **Why?**

‘Did you have a nice time in Berlin?’ came a welcoming voice
as I finished my unpacking.

‘Yes,’ I replied flatly, ‘very nice.’

‘You don’t sound very enthusiastic. As a matter of fact,
you look a bit upset.’

‘Berlin was great but, oh Lucille! It was the plane journey
home. The stewardess had just come alongside and asked me
what I would like to drink when a plaintive little voice said
“excuse me”. It was a child returning from the toilet; a lovely
little girl with fine features, of, I guess, seven years of age;
pale, completely bald, breathing apparatus into one nostril.
Cancer. The hostess spoke kindly to her and moved the trolley
so that she could return to her seat. I could see that the hearts
of virtually everybody on the plane went out to her, and to her
mother who looked worn and haggard.

‘Forty-five minutes later, the plane started its descent into
the airport, there was a change in cabin pressure which
obviously affected the little thing, and she started to sob
piteously, calling out “Mummy, Mummy” continuously. It was

heart-rending, and all the more so because I and my fellow passengers had little choice but to sit there helplessly. I suppose we were all trying to deal with it in our own way. I closed my eyes and started to pray to God to be compassionate, but the sobbing continued; actually it was more a prolonged cry of anguish. We consoled ourselves, no doubt, with the thought that the plane would soon be on the ground and that at least the current ordeal would be over for the child, so we all held together and preserved the stiff upper lip. Until she called out in an agonised wail that cut through me like a hot knife through butter: “Oh God, please help me.”

Lucille said nothing. I almost invariably apply to her store of knowledge and wisdom when I am perplexed, and I longed to ask her why, in heaven’s name, God permits such things, but intuitively sensed that this time she had no answers. Actually it had nothing to do with intuition; one look at her eyes brimming with tears and the trembling lip told me all I needed to know. God’s ways are inscrutable, she might conceivably have said if pushed, but I knew that already, so there was no point.

It has just crossed my mind that several of these chronicles terminate with tears of one sort or another, and – pride of course – I really don’t want to create the impression that Lucille and I are cry-babies. You will understand, therefore, that I am loath to finish this particular account in the same fashion. So I won’t. Anyway there’s no need. It’s obvious. There wasn’t a dry eye on the plane.

(“On A Different Plane”, story in *Life With Lucille*)

443 **A sense of timing**

At eleven seconds past eleven on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in the year two thousand and eleven, my wife and I hugged each other, told each other how we are still so much in love, and I thanked God for everything in my life. Good sense of timing – won’t happen again for another hundred years. I don’t suppose we’ll be still around!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

444 **What age am I?**

If you were to ask me my age and really wanted to know the truth, the answer is, perhaps surprisingly, not as simple as it might seem.

Ageing is in my body. Age, on the other hand, is in my intellect, in my emotions and in the essence of my being; or, put more appropriately, in my perspective, born of lifelong experience, and in my spirit, which, in turn, form the foundation of my reality. Hence my body, which constitutes but a relatively small, albeit – for the moment – vital, part of who I am, is at whatever chronological milestone it reaches each year; my intellect is currently hovering at around forty; my emotions are, and long have been, mostly those of a three-year-old. And I am totally okay with that; they keep me young at heart and full of childlike awe at the beauty and wonder that manifest in my life in each moment, and give me a child's healing tears when I am in distress, which thankfully is never more than several times a day! My spirit, which I sometimes call my deepest heart, is, in complete contrast, timeless therefore ageless, and is always at perfect peace, whether or not I am consciously aware of that fact. And the heart that knows True Love is eternal.

So, you wanted to know what age I am? I did answer your question, but I don't suppose you're too much the wiser. Does this mean I am being evasive because I am sensitive about my accumulation of years? No, it means that when one truly comprehends the concept of age there is, as I intimated at the start, no pat answer.

Our British neighbours are apt to pose the question somewhat differently: 'How old are you?' Now the response to that is simplicity itself: I am not old and I never will be.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

445 **An apocryphal story**

The story is told of two brothers, the eldest of whom inherited the family farm in the West of Ireland while the other emigrated to America, became very successful in business, and did not journey back to the land of his ancestors for almost forty years.

During this prolonged absence, the brother who had stayed at home expanded and improved the family farm beyond recognition, acquiring adjacent land, successfully embracing new farming technologies and the complexities of European regulation. The homecoming sibling was quick to spot this and complimented his brother on his achievements as they were having a pint one evening shortly before the end of his vacation: ‘You know, Paddy, I am amazed at what I see here. I left a slow-moving, agricultural existence and now I return to a high-tech, high-pressure business. This must put you under a great deal of stress. I go to my analyst twice a month to deal with all the pressure. You should go to an analyst as well. It would keep you in emotional balance.’

Paddy, who had never lost his basic, inherited cultural and spiritual values or his connectedness with Nature, took a long, slow, thoughtful sip of his pint and then responded: ‘Any fella who goes to one of them psyche ... psycho ... what’d-you-call-hims ought to have his head examined!’

(From the Introduction to *Oh, My Head!*)

446 **Sheep – or us?**

Gentle, inoffensive animals, sheep;
Cuddly yet befuddled,
Irresistibly endearing,
Yet incapable of taking care of themselves.
They must be led into the pasture,
Led beside quiet waters,
Led through the darkest valleys,
And led back to the sanctuary of the fold.
Left to themselves they perish ...

(From ‘Comparison’, poem in *Overdoing It!*)

447 **Two levels of feeling**

My spirit has deep, steadfast feelings which have little or nothing to do with my ordinary human emotions. The human emotions are volatile, like new shoots emerging in spring one minute and autumn leaves tossed about in a storm the next, but the emotions of my spirit come about as an intuitive, a profound and lasting response to the experience of God's unconditional love. Sometimes, however, my spirit emotions get buried under an avalanche of human emotions which can temporarily deceive me into believing that all is lost. These are my darkest hours.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

448 **Fred spots my Achilles' heel**

'I have finally come to understand, my dear Fred, why I differ markedly from so many other people of my acquaintance. They all seem to have been endowed with varying degrees of emotional insulation, whereas I was born with none.'

'You don't say?' said Fred in a patronising sort of way.

'Yes, I definitely do say! Small wonder then that I am prone to being hurt so easily. Unleash but the slightest of fortune's slings or shoot the tiniest of her arrows, and I react as though I had been washed over by a succession of tidal waves or trampled on by a stampeding herd of overweight elephants.'

'Really?' said Fred in a tone of voice that bordered on contemptuous.

'Yes, Fred, really! And as a case in point, your current tone of voice is offhand, even sceptical, and I find that offensive. You might be a trifle more sympathetic, even if only out of self-interest, given that you are inescapably affected by whatever's going on with me.'

'You think so?' said Fred.

'I don't think so, I know so, you inconsiderate jackass. To put it another way, I am the kind of person that needs to be treated, on an ongoing basis, with tender loving care by all my family and friends and by those beyond. It is just

incomprehensible to me that people cannot mind their Ps and Qs when in my presence. They ought to know that I need to be treated with gentleness.'

'With what?'

'Gentleness, dimwit! Surely to God you know what that is,' I replied with more than a hint of scorn. 'To put it another way, treading on my toes is scarcely a laudable pursuit. "Softly, softly" ought, at all times, to be on the lips and in the hearts of my entire kith and kin where I am concerned.'

'In short, would you say that you're sensitive?'

'That,' I retorted caustically, 'is what I, as articulately as humanly possible, was endeavouring to communicate.'

'What you are trying to tell me, then,' said Fred, moving decisively from question to assertion, 'is that you're a touchy little bastard!'

(*'Tough Love'*, story in *Life With Fred*)

449 **A tapestry**

My life – past, present and into the eternal future – is like a gigantic tapestry. Some of the colours, seen individually, are dark and foreboding, while others are bright and optimistic. But the overall effect, when all the colours are seen in relation to each other, is stupendously beautiful – that is in those rare, fleeting moments when My God allows me a glimpse of the whole. Mostly, though, my life is simply about asking him to let me see the next thread or two, which is all I need day to day. That must suffice for now. This process can be trying and frustrating, but at least I can draw on the sublime experience of having seen the bigger picture.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

450 **Some alliteration!**

'For starters, will you deny that you have secretly succumbed to the secular sacrilege of having sickeningly excessive sex with six successive seductive secretaries?'

(From *'No Comment'*, story in *In My Write Mind*)

451 **What is a problem?**

A difficult situation – medical, financial, romantic, work-related or whatever – is not a problem; it’s just a situation. What can turn a situation into a problem is my reaction to it. I have had major situations in my life to which I reacted in an appropriate and healthy way; that is, I adopted a correct attitude to it and then either went about solving it, or, if unsolvable, accepting it. Equally, I have had minor situations – pebbles in the shoe – to which I reacted badly, and the whole situation took on the aspect of a major problem, and then got worse because I wouldn’t accept the outcome. It would be wonderful if I could apply this insight to every situation I encounter, but, being human, I can only aspire to relative success. As I have said so many times, it’s progress not perfection that counts. If I strive for perfection and fail, as fail I must, I create a serious problem: the despondency, even despair, at not measuring up to my own impossible ideals.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

452 **Insomnia**

‘For heaven’s sake, it’s just not fair, is it Lucille? Last night when visiting points south, billeted with the revered relative, I slept the night through without waking even once, for the first time in over twenty years. I was chuffed, almost ecstatic, on beholding the bedside timepiece through barely open eyes this morning, to discover that more than seven blissful hours had elapsed since Morpheus had taken me to his lair, and I then nodded off for a bonus of two and a half more of the same. Yet here I am at bloody well four thirty of the subsequent a.m. sitting sleepless at the keyboard. I was abed at midnight, awake first at one forty-five, again at three o’clock, followed by a one hour period of mental scenarios – the type insomniacs thrive on – relentlessly playing and replaying on the cerebral screen, until, in frustration – unable to turn off the psychic video player – I descended to kettle, teapot, word processor and your moral support, cherished Muse.’

(From ‘Insult To Injury’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

453 **Who am I?**

This a variation on the theme propounded in my essay 'Labelling' in the collection, *Reality And Illusion & Other Essays*.

At first glance, 'Who am I?' sounds like a silly question. Yet anybody from whom I have ever requested an answer (including myself!) has had considerable difficulty in answering it. Why? I believe that we are so conditioned by many influences – education, religion, parenting, societal mores and the rest – that the vision of who we really are has become buried under a heap of false or, at the very least, questionable or inappropriate values – inappropriate for *us*, that is. It often takes a long time for us to realise that this is the case; generally, it requires some major catalyst to make us question the values we have accepted and followed all our lives. Equally, it takes a long time for us to reclaim our true selves. It's a lifetime's work actually, because first we need to unlearn the thinking and behaviour of decades, then learn to replace them with the true and wholesome ones that are an integral part of who we really are.

So, if you were, for instance, to ask me to write an essay entitled 'Who Am I?', I would politely decline, simply because I am work in progress and could, for this reason, never complete the exercise. I might, however, offer to attempt an essay entitled 'On Becoming Me'. I really like that word 'becoming'. It suggests a process and processes take time. Becoming is not for those who want a quick fix. So I will spend my lifetime becoming; it is often very painful, but also amazingly beautiful; bittersweet you might say.

Perhaps I will have a go at that essay, 'On Becoming Me'. Hmm! Come to think of it, my books *Perspectives*, 4th edn, *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection* and *Black On Magenta* (a partially autobiographical novel), the seven volumes of poems on the spiritual journey, and several other books relevant to this theme, contain nearly three quarters of a million words between them. I suppose that's not a bad start!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

454 **You'd think they'd have more sense**

The bird is pecking peanuts
From the wire cage near the window,
And there's plenty for his fellows
Perched in trees around the garden;
Yet, how often he's possessive
And will fight off each intruder
So that he might have sole access,
In his self-absorbed abundance,
To the plenty I've provided.

Nature is a wonder,
But I sometimes fall to thinking
That it spoils its awesome mystery
When it emulates humanity.

(‘Disillusion’, poem in *Overdoing It!*)

455 **A winter morning**

One morning in winter,
I sit at the breakfast table and gaze through the window;
There's a small bird on my window sill,
And he is looking in at me,
All mournful and forlorn
For an icy barrier has cut off all his sustenance
This winter's morn.
Frozen droplets are fossilising
The feathers of his delicate wings,
So that he has no choice but to remain earthbound.

I, in contrast, am swathed in warmth,
Courtesy of an unknown Saudi Arabian Sheikh,
My tissues restored by an ample repast.
It's all so unbalanced, so unfair,
And the last few mouthfuls of the warming brew
Bring little comfort
As I contemplate the plight of my brother-in-nature.

(From ‘The Little Bird’, poem in *No Rest For The Wicked*)

456 **Maverick**

Four collections of my poetry in four months. That's a bit obsessive isn't it?

Yes. It is. Keeps me off the streets though!

Let me see; is there anything else to be said? Oh, yes! Now and again, I wonder if some of my pieces are poetry or prose. As a case in point I was looking at 'Poor Little Rich Girl' on page 66. When I read it in what I call 'read-size chunks' – that is, make an appropriate pause at the end of each line – it sounds like poetry, but when I read it as a continuous narrative, it sounds like prose. So which is it? I agonised over this for quite some time, but eventually came up with an answer, in question format, which will undoubtedly make the purist wince, but which totally satisfies me, and it's this: what the hell does it matter?

Which leaves only one possible concluding comment: since my blatant disregard for the niceties of poetic convention has already been displayed, the purist had better not read any further.

(From the Introduction to *Hang On!*)

457 **Consideration for the reader**

If you pandered to my ego by working your way through my earlier privately produced tomes, *Homage To A Future Hero And Other Personal Favourites* and *Life With Lucille, Muse of Muses*, and – being too polite to tell me to stuff this latest collection up my gansey – feel obliged to pander further, take heart: this one is much shorter! ...

I'll let you into a little secret: I never much liked poetry until I unexpectedly started to write it myself in 1989, and I have still not managed to figure out what triggered this aberration. All I know is that I now find writing the stuff very relaxing and enjoyable. Poetry isn't everybody's cup of tea of course, and my poetry is hardly anybody's cup of tea, but I do hope that a few of the pieces in this new collection will appeal to you.

(From the Introduction to *Grin And Bear It!*)

458 **Why the darkness is so dark**

I have been on the planet long enough to have seen a clear pattern emerge in my life: out of the times of greatest pain have come the greatest wonders, from the greatest darkness, the brightest light. From feelings of abandonment and bewilderment at the age of three, when my mother got sick, never to recover, and my father started his own business and (to use an expression of an aunt who lived with us at the time) was gone twenty-five hours a day, came a very happy childhood. From underperforming in primary and secondary school came later academic distinction. Out of the need to re-educate myself in the face of severe financial difficulties, I met my wonderful wife; out of the total loss of the family business after five stressful years of trying to save it, came the job I always wanted; out of a time of spiritual turmoil, the most stupendous miracles; out of a ten-year period during which I had lost my way, came a new, wholesome path for living my life; out of the darkness of depression and anxiety have come empathy with and compassion for my fellow travellers; and out of that same heartache has come some of my best writing – much of it, in seeming paradox, light-hearted. And out of a lifelong yearning for something that I knew beyond doubt to be utterly impossible came its eventual extraordinary realisation.

At this point (October 2016), I am darkness again, and it has been going on for quite a while. But there is one remarkable difference in the current phase to all the preceding ones: the darkness is frequently, indeed daily, punctuated by the most stupendous intervals of light which bear witness to an everlasting bliss – at which point, understandably, I have run out of any language that would be fitting to describe it further. The nearest I can get is to refer to it as the pain/joy enigma or the bewildering blend of miracle and misery. I will summarise, therefore, by saying that the darkness, it seems, will not go away; but neither will the miracles ...

Nevertheless, at times there is darkness in the traditional sense and it is hard to endure – because it *seems* absolute in the moment I'm experiencing it, and can create the powerful, if

momentary, illusion that all is lost. But it is precisely that: *illusion*. And illusion is always replaced by reality. Most surely I have learned by now that the only way forward is to draw hope from the pattern of my history, and allow myself to be nurtured by the daily intervals of light – of love – in the current phase.

I find it comforting to reflect on how positive and vibrant a part colour plays in my life: the colours of Nature, the subtleties of a beautiful painting, the tones I choose for my home and so much more. But when there is no light, there is no colour. If I am looking at a vivid landscape a little before sunset, then go indoors and come out again somewhat later, there is no more colour, nothing but sombre shapes at best; and, in the pitch dark, nothing at all. So then in my life: when there is light, there is colour; but when the darkness comes, the colour goes out of my life. But light is incredibly more powerful than dark; the dark *can never* engulf the light, the light *always* dispels the dark. Dawn inevitably follows night.

As I have said elsewhere: a) in my life, the pain is the soil in which the miracles grow; and b) it's all about trust – trusting that the light will come, as it cannot fail to do ...

So, were a younger person to read this, what is to be learned? It's this: no matter how black things seem now, light is certain to follow dark, and if you haven't been on the planet long enough to see your own pattern, trust in mine and that of countless other mature people who have travelled the same road. Also entrust your life to One higher. We cannot do this alone. It has been my experience that when I cannot trust, when the darkness seems overpowering, the trusting is done for me; that's how loved I am. Whatever pain you may be in, it will pass. The light will come. And the dark will have made you stronger, by which I mean that you cannot truly appreciate the wonder of the light until you have experienced the distress of the darkness. Therefore, take heart. All will be well.

(From 'Darkness And Light', essay in
Reality And Illusion & Other Essays)

459 **Is heaven really like this?**

Picture, therefore ... the following scenario: we are in the sumptuous heavenly mansion (God doesn't do things by halves, you know), comfortably ensconced in the living room which, give or take a square yard or two, covers about fifty million acres, with an extension on the drawing board to accommodate further Earthlings who (if you'll pardon the pun) are up and coming. God is seated on his throne in front of the fire; well maybe not a fire – that's in the other place – but something which suggests warmth and cosiness, scanning the financial columns of the 'Celestial Times'. A short distance away, a three-week old baby is squawking in an upmarket manger, and squirming in his designer swaddling clothes ...

Look, there's no point in coming up with mere technicalities. How the hell should I know why a new-born baby is up in heaven, being looked after by God? Go on like that, and we're going to miss the whole point of the story. Where was I? Oh yes. Eventually, baby gives voice to its strongly felt sentiments: 'I say, God, I don't want to be tiresome or anything, but if you don't change my nappy, give me my bottle, vitamin droplets, inoculations and so forth, pretty soon, I'm going to snuff it!'

(From 'What's In A Quotation?', story in *In My Write Mind*)

460 **Importance of presentation at interviews – and elsewhere**

Consider another analogy. You are one of the country's top fashion designers and have just opened your first high street shop. You toss the most beautiful garments in a haphazard manner across a few chairs in the shop window. A week passes by and not one customer! You are baffled. A friend advises you to engage the services of a top window dresser, who displays your garments in a highly professional, eye-catching way. The following week, you can hardly cope with the volume of business. Same garments, different result. Do you get my drift?

(From the booklet *Just The Job*)

461 **Living in the present?**

Some years ago, I remember reading something that went more or less like this: I am out for a very long walk in the countryside, and, having forgotten my watch, I lose track of time. Eventually I notice that the light is beginning to fail. The only living creature that I can see within striking distance is a horse looking at me over a fence a few yards away. So I ask the animal what time it is. It looks at me in bewilderment and responds, ‘Time? What time is it? It’s *now*. I mean what other time could it be?’

I do not by any means fully subscribe to what I call ‘The Cult Of Now’, but, in practical terms, staying present, as best one can, to the current undertaking is a good way to live, with, however, notable and substantial exceptions.* But it’s not easy. I imagine most people have their own way of bringing themselves back on track when they are straying too much into the past or future. Deep breathing is often recommended. That doesn’t work for me; I actually find taking very deep breaths quite stressful. What I find is helpful – not all the time of course; nothing’s perfect – is what I call slow, medium breaths. In other words, longer breaths than my normal breathing pattern, but not fully in and not fully out, and, most importantly, slower than normal. I have a quartet of words which I sometimes use in my mind to accompany the breaths: ‘slow, gentle, medium breaths’. I don’t have to do it for long; even a few of these breaths slows me down and brings me back into the present. Even if I am in the present, but am feeling overly anxious, the same straightforward technique often works.

Finally, while taking the breaths, an attitude of simple prayerfulness brings me into harmony with the true purpose of the moment, even if this process is not perfect either.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See the essay ‘How Now?’ in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn.

462 **Birthgift**

The term 'birthright' is widely used in appropriate contexts, and I have often used it. Recently, I have changed my views on its suitability as a term to describe what I actually possess or have access to. What rights do I have? What rights does a new-born baby have? In my perception, none. All I have, and ever had and ever will have, was, is and will be, *given* to me. And the word I use for what is given to me is 'Gift'. I have no rights that were given to me at birth, or at any other time, only gifts. So, I have a 'birthgift', which was what? To be whole, happy and at one with my Creator. I have come to see that as profoundly true in my life, but it won't all come to pass in this dimension.

Anybody who knows me or who has perused my writings will know that I find life difficult to say the least. But I am not unhappy. Some of my birthgift has been given to me here to ensure that circumstance. The rest will fall into place in what I call 'the fullness of forever'. To put it another way: the storms of life notwithstanding, fundamentally all is well.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

463 **Perspectives are constantly evolving**

These are my perspectives at the date of writing. They are constantly evolving, and I am reminded of what Charles Ringma said (in *Seize The Day*) in relation to Christians and, I am sure, reflects the experience of all religious traditions, indeed of all who seek the truth by whatever path:

Christians do not always live in a state of certainty regarding their faith. The fact that we change and grow in our understanding of God means that previous certainties will need to be replaced by new ones. It is not only change, however, but also unexpected events or disappointments that can shake our certainties and lead to doubt. Doubt itself need not be unproductive, for it can be the intermediate step to new certainties.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

464 **Lucille lightens up**

She tried her level best to appear offended and angry, but failed miserably.

‘It’s so awfully frustrating; I don’t know what effect you have on me, but I just can’t ever seem to get mad at you. All the same, it was a little unkind; why did you tease me like that?’

‘Because my sixth sense tells me that all your previous writers (with the exception of P.G. Wodehouse and Jane Austen) were stuffy old fuddy-duddies who were unable to provide you with that sprinkling of light-hearted playfulness that you secretly enjoy, providing it’s not hurtful to anyone. What you need, Lucille, is more fun in your life, and I am merely restoring the balance.’

I was expecting a coherent counterargument, but had temporarily overlooked Lucille’s disarming honesty. ‘You’re right, I do ...’

(From ‘Prescription’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

465 **As we forgive those who trespass against us**

‘Well, never mind, Fred,’ I bubbled effervescently; ‘you know what the Bible says about God turning all things to good. The same revered scriptures say something about forgiving seventy times seven, not judging so that one might not be judged, and all that sort of thing. So I forgive you, even if your intent was malicious. Indeed, you have done me a singular service since the inability to label my condition would have kept me awake all night. Much gratitude to you, therefore, old buddy. Great book, the Bible; you should read it sometime.’

‘Hallelujah, praise be, amen and up yours,’ retorted Fred, in what I considered to be a tone of voice unnecessarily tinged with sarcasm and more than a hint of coarseness, not to mention the atrocious absence of respect and good taste.

Mine, however, is not a vindictive nature, so I sought no revenge. I merely beamed upon him with a patronising smile, and brought this pleasant little exchange to a felicitous conclusion: ‘Bless you too, Fred,’ I said.

(From ‘A Blessing – Sort Of’, story in *Life With Fred*)

466 **Faithfulness versus faith**

I have discovered, to my enormous relief after years of struggling with the ... concept of faith, that I am not a 'faith' person. I am a 'faithfulness' person. Faith and faithfulness are not the same, not by any means.

Faithfulness is born of love; it is a spontaneous, intuitive, response to divine, unconditional love – to the lover; and it continues to thrive on love received and love given in return; therefore it is a continuously renewing process. Faith on the other hand is more likely to be akin to a dogged stoicism, often described as blind faith. I have heard it suggested that a strong faith is based on knowing that, despite appearances to the contrary, fundamentally all is well. This is a contradiction in terms. Where there is knowledge, faith can be put in cold storage. When I take faith out again is during those periods of 'fog' that I have written about elsewhere ...

Faithfulness is not something that is 'rewarded' at some time in the future. It is a way of being. It is a spontaneous response to the Essence of Universal Love – to the lover; and the in-the-moment experience of the love response is self-justifying. It simply *is*.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

467 **Boundaries**

It feels as if, for much of my life, I have been like a small, landlocked country with few if any border guards. All sorts of people and ideas, both desirable and undesirable, have wondered over the frontier and taken up residence without my permission. Now ... there are so many refugees in my head, there is hardly any room for me. They're making too much noise, making it very difficult for me to tune in to the essence of who I am. It's time to start a process of repatriation. Create a bit of space for me. Just to be me.

(Some time later) I am glad to report considerable progress in ejecting the aliens!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

468 **More on boundaries**

Struggling daily to live up to other people's expectations of me is one of the most tyrannical forms of slavery – the more so because I have become enslaved with my own tacit approval. I am astonished that I could have lived for so long in ignorance of this obvious reality. It is good my head now acknowledges it, but I shall remain enslaved until my heart accepts that I do not have to dance to anyone else's tune, and daily take practical steps to say 'No' or whatever is appropriate to stop unessential visitors crossing my frontiers.

Relinquishing this slavery does not mean that I do not have to conform in certain ways; of course I do. I am a valued member of a society of men and women, and cannot reasonably expect to live as an anarchist. But the real liberation comes when I realise that my perception of why I do these things has changed utterly, and that my spirit can be as free as a bird. In short, warts and all, it's okay to be me. From now on, I'm going to write my own music.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

469 **Who's boss around here?**

I needed to consult somebody in the know, and my gut feeling told me that Fred, though frequently disagreeable and off the wall, would come up with the goodies on this occasion. Mind you, I had an uncomfortable suspicion that his response would not be quite what I might expect. But it's always best, I've discovered, to honour one's gut feeling, so I braced myself and summoned the fellow from whatever region of my brain he had been inhabiting since our last encounter.

'Fred!' I called.

'Yes,' he said, responding dutifully to his master's voice. (I *am* his master, incidentally, lest there be any doubt about it, although I have not yet informed him of this fact for one reason or another. I must get around to it sometime.)

(From 'There You Have It', story in *Life With Fred*)

470 **Lucille shocks me**

‘I was rather wondering, Lucille, whether it would be possible to ...’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, seeing that you have hitherto operated almost exclusively from the realms of my imagination, and the fact that we have known each other a long time, I have this strong desire to consolidate our friendship by ...’

‘Yes?’

‘That is to say, I’m not too sure what view the Universe takes of such matters, whether, in fact, there are any barriers to our ...’

‘Yes?’

‘I mean surely it would not contravene some cosmic strategy if you could ...’

‘Please get to the point,’ said Lucille, though more out of curiosity than impatience.

‘Could we meet? I mean, face-to-face – the real, bodily you meet the real, bodily me?’

Lucille looked thoughtful. ‘Only on very rare occasions has my father permitted us to manifest physically to our writers. I never have, never wanted to, but with you ...’ She left the sentence unfinished.

Now it was my turn: ‘Yes?’

‘That is, er ...’ Lucille was a little flustered; ‘I mean, I could approach him, but if he were to allow it, there would be one very strict condition.’

‘Namely?’

‘No hanky-panky.’

I was shocked and disappointed. My precious Muse always tells the truth, but she is rarely so colloquially forthright, and then there was the implied slight to my reputation ...

(From ‘Body Language’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

471 **Appearances can be deceptive**

People think I'm organised,
Perfection's special treat,
And cite, as one example,
How I keep my things so neat.

Oh, what a false perception,
For little do they guess
The outer show of order
Only hides the inner mess.

(‘Camouflage’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

472 **All's well ...**

‘It’s just not possible to feel this bad,’ I groaned to myself,
head buried deep in hands, bewildered and disoriented to an
unprecedented degree, tears – scarcely withheld – stinging my
eyes ...

... I felt sure that it must have been a trick of the mind,
aided and abetted by a deception of the senses, because ... I
was in the room by myself, but I could have sworn that ... I
felt a comforting arm around my shoulder, a hand gently
stroking my hair, a soft pressing sensation like a kiss on my
forehead, and the warmth of an invisible closeness ... ‘No,
no,’ I said, banishing the foolish notion from my head. ‘It’s
just unthinkable. ... It couldn’t possibly be her; she’s just a
figment of my imagination – a happy contrivance admittedly –
but just a device I use for writing, nothing more ... Isn’t she?’
Curiosity, inevitably, would have its way: ‘Lucille?’ I said,
tentatively.

‘There, there,’ she whispered. ‘Lucille kiss it better.’

(From ‘There There’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

473 **A heartfelt prayer**

Please put your arms around me, hold me very close, and do
for me what I cannot do for myself – which, come to think of
it, embraces just about everything!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

474 **A new fallacy**

I have never studied logic or philosophy formally, but am aware that there are a number of Fallacies. One, for example, states that one thing does not necessarily come about as a consequence of another (*Post hoc, ergo propter hoc* – ‘After this, therefore because of this’). If I pray for rain tonight and it rains in the morning, it does not necessarily follow that it rained because I prayed. It rained because there was a ridge of low pressure coming in over the Atlantic and it was going to rain anyway! Similarly, there is the Fallacy of Composition, I think it’s called, that is, ‘because one, therefore all’. I like ice cream, therefore everybody likes ice cream.

I would like to add a fallacy of my own, acknowledging that in the paucity of my knowledge of the field, it may be covered by one of the existing ones. It is the Fallacy of Conformity, and it runs as follows:

If a man does not think like other people in all matters of substance, then he is in the wrong and/or there is something wrong with him.

This fallacy is widely held to be reality. Those who would disagree with me might point to people such as Van Gogh, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo or Jesus of Nazareth, and say how much we accept and honour the fact they thought and acted distinctly differently from other people in many ways. We may do so *now* when we have evidence of the value of their thinking and actions, but in their own time they were frequently derided or even scorned. Van Gogh took his own life because his genius was unrecognised. Leonardo da Vinci had to study corpses surreptitiously in order to gain his path-breaking knowledge of human anatomy because his activities would have been frowned upon. Galileo, in his advocacy of the Copernican system, was branded as a heretic and forced to recant. Jesus of Nazareth’s teaching was so popular that they put him to death.

Because we have seen such amazing discoveries since the Industrial Revolution, and since there has been an enormous social revolution to accompany it, we are somewhat more

tolerant of different thinking than in previous eras. In balance, however, I perceive the improvement in tolerance levels to be only marginal relative to the bigger picture. We still have religions, philosophies and political systems that overtly, or more often subtly, dictate what is right, and if you step outside the mould then, so the fallacy runs, you are in the wrong or there is something wrong with you.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

475 **Double standards**

Just look at that poster in the shop window;
It's absolutely disgraceful.
I mean, there are nudes and nudes.
Some are the epitome of good taste,
Bringing the human body literally to an art form,
And gracing the world's prominent art galleries.
But this one is ... well, it's disgusting ...
An affront to public decency
And an insult to every thinking person.
Nothing's sacred any more,
All is laid bare for general consumption;
It's implicitly and explicitly suggestive,
And would turn the head of the most solid citizen.
Small wonder that the world is in a monumental mess,
And public morals in a state of disarray.
Somebody should do something about it –
Take action to prevent, once and for all,
Such a wanton display of private places in public places.
Indeed, I am so utterly incensed
By this outrageous exhibition of lewdness,
That I will take the matter in hand myself.
If it is still in the window
The next time I pass by,
I'll ... er ... go in and ask for it.
It would look nice on my bedroom ceiling.

(‘Double Standards’, poem in *Who Do They Think I Am?*)

476 **Gratitude for the gifts of the Creator**

‘There’s no doubt about it, Fred, but the best things in life are undoubtedly free. Take all this wonderful fresh air,’ I said, drinking in a healthy gulp, it’s there by the billion cubic metres, just for the breathing in, and at no charge.’

‘Yes,’ said Fred.

‘And look, if you will, up the river and toward the lake. In an era where many people, poor souls, travel long distances for just a cup, we have life-giving water by the billion bucketfuls – or is it bucketsfull. Water, water everywhere and all of it to drink, so to speak, and at no charge’

‘Yes,’ said Fred.

‘Did you ever see such beautiful countryside, green fields, meadows, rolling hills, valleys, punctuated with an incredible variety of flora, all of it changing in every moment depending on the humours of the sun, wind and clouds – a magnificent patchwork of Nature’s splendour. All we have to do is stand here and take it all in, and at no charge?’

‘Yes,’ said Fred.

‘And did you ever marvel at the profusion of God’s creatures? In the rivers, lakes, fields, highlands and lowlands, in the air and in the seven seas, we have a splendid variety of lovely creatures: insects of all kinds, big fish, small fish, big birds, small birds, big animals, small animals, from the humblest to the most exotic, each one doing its own particular thing, more or less it seems for our enjoyment. All we have to do is stand here and enjoy the passing parade and, incredibly, at no charge.

‘Yes,’ said Fred.

(From ‘The Best Things In Life’, story in *Life With Fred*)

477 **Wants and needs**

I also need to differentiate between my wants which are never satisfied and my needs which are always taken care of – even if often I don’t see it that way, and as long as I don’t dictate how they are to be met.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

478 **Does God take?**

Over the years, I have heard people, particularly in difficult times, say things like, ‘God took my loved one’, or ‘My health has been taken from me’, or ‘It must be God’s will that I lost my job’, and so on. This makes God out to be somewhat arbitrary, even cruel. In my experience, however, even though it has often felt as if God is taking something from me, he doesn’t simply take, he replaces. Whenever something is taken from me, it is because God wants to replace it with something more valuable and enduring. However, the pain that comes from the initial taking away can deceive me into believing that the taking only caused meaningless anguish. The truth seems to be that, because of the intensity of the pain, I cannot see what the replacement is, or else that something has been removed but the replacement has not yet been given. I have a dear friend who often says, ‘God may be slow, but he’s never too late!’ That wonderful woman, Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind, said,

When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened for us.

In my own life, time and time again, darkness has been replaced by light, but not always immediately. (See piece 458, ‘Why the darkness is so dark’, on page 232.) The ultimate replacement, of course, is this mortal life for the eternal one.

As an aside, I have *never* heard anybody make statements like these: ‘I have met the man/woman of my dreams, it’s God’s will’; ‘I got the job I always wanted, it’s God’s will’; ‘I won enough in the Lotto to pay off my debts, it’s God’s will’; and so on. See: when something bad happens, it’s God’s will; when something good happens, it’s good luck. Once again, we see the product of seriously misguided conditioning.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

479 **Business ethics?**

I have just purchased a bottle of [branded soft drink] to discover that consumers, on collection of the requisite number of labels, can acquire a free spying device. The label informs us that ‘The device allows you to listen to your friends’ conversations – when they don’t know you’re listening – smart or what?!

Is this company so stuck for business that they must encourage people to indulge in what is fundamentally intrusive and anti-social behaviour in order to sell their fizzy drink? Are there any standards left in business, or have we now reached the stage where anything goes as long as it generates profits? Sadly, I think the behaviour of so many commercial enterprises today shows the latter to be the truth. What is even sadder is the probability that large numbers of consumers will acquire and use these gizmos, considering them ‘cool’.

Two parting thoughts: 1. Are such devices legal? 2. Does anybody care?

(From a letter, June 2001)

480 **The highest form of prayer and grace**

I have always been taught, and have come independently to know, that I need God’s grace to do anything, to do everything. So grace to me means ‘God’s empowerment’. But I inherited the notion from my religious education that I am always the unworthy, sinful recipient of God’s condescending grace.

However, the word comes, by various routes, and forming various derivatives over the centuries from the Latin word *gratia* which means ‘gratitude’. So God does not condescend; he shows us *his* gratitude by empowering us in our daily lives. Just think: the Creator of all that is shows us his gratitude. Seen against the backdrop of traditional teaching, this is mind-blowing stuff, but is totally compatible with an unconditionally loving God – a God of both infinite love and infinite humility.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

481 **Hear no evil!**

Apart from that, I have no intention of giving you a blow-by-blow account of the past few weeks – if for no better reason than I don't want to hear it!

(From a letter, December 2006)

482 **The Dream**

*Air, food and water will keep my body functioning,
but I need a Dream to nurture my spirit.*

This quotation is from my writings and it is one of my favourites. The upper case D in 'Dream' is not an error; it's deliberate, because I am not alluding here to the ethereal, often baffling dreams produced by the unconscious. For the most part, these are better described as illusions or distortions. Neither am I talking about the daydreams of the house on the hill, the big car, the prince or princess charming, or whatever it is *we* think will make us happy.

I invite you, rather, to yearn for a Dream which can only come from One infinitely higher than us. Don't choose your own; let the yearning deep inside attract the Dream that is unique to you. Mine – stupendous beyond description – came to fullness in the year 2000, and it has been with me ever since (over sixteen years at this writing), even in the darkest hours. It is too personal to share, but you don't need to hear about mine; when The Dream – Your Dream – comes to you, you will *know* what I am talking about.

And what if you do not believe in One higher? That need be no barrier. Simply acknowledge the yearning, then the journey can begin. You don't have to question where it is coming from. Nor do you have to do anything beyond allowing the yearning to be within you. The Dream is given unconditionally and its fulfilment comes in due season, when the moment is right.

Don't have a Dream, or cannot discern the yearning? Just ask – and be open to the unexpected.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

483 **It's all about attitude**

'Crumbs, Fred! I don't know why I didn't see it before. It's as obvious as a windscreen to a squashed fly. It's all about attitude.'

'What is?' snapped my mercurial inner voice.

'Life!'

'Huh?'

'And well you might say "Huh!" indeed! You're a perfect example of a deplorably cockeyed attitude. Right now you're as grumpy as a warthog with gout but, as I know only too well, you're as volatile as the blasted weather. In two minutes' time, you could be telling me a risqué story, and two minutes after that, acquire that all-too-familiar, far away, yearning look in your eyes. I never know what to expect next; I just can't keep up with you. Now I, on the other hand am all in favour of a life of balance and serenity but, with your emotional gymnastics, I have an ice cube's hope in hell of ever achieving it. What you need,' I concluded in exasperation, searching for a suitably trenchant comment, 'is a ... a ... a ... an attitude transplant.'

'Did I tell you the one about the actress and the bishop?' queried Fred, moving into his jocular phase pretty much on schedule.

'There you go, proving my point! And yes you did tell me, about twenty bloody times as a matter of fact; so shove a sock in it, will you!'

'Oh!' said Fred, somewhat crestfallen, and with that, an all-too-familiar look of faraway yearning came into his eyes.

'Right on cue,' I muttered moodily, and I had just decided to toddle off and make myself a comforting cup of tea, leaving my psychic sidekick to ponder whatever it was he was yearning for – probably something far-fetched and impractical – when he piped unexpectedly up.

'I was just thinking ...'

'Well done!'

'I was just thinking,' repeated Fred, ignoring the sniper fire, 'that the attitude we both most need to cultivate is one of

gratitude – gratitude for the many, many blessings in our life, not the least of which is ...’

‘Gratitude!’ I snarled. ‘For what? For you? Gratitude for having a pestilential, little bollocks permanently inhabiting my head? You must be out of your diseased half of our mind!’

‘Now who needs an attitude transplant?’ countered Fred.

‘You just watch it!’ I blustered. I was preparing to launch a blistering, retaliatory attack on the resident parasite, but stopped in my tracks. Loath though I was to admit it, Fred was dead right, and I had learned from experience that it was much better to acknowledge it than risk starting a civil war in my head.

‘Er ... um ... Oh, you’re right, Fred,’ I conceded, if reluctantly, ‘we do. I’ll, um ... get working on it more or less straight away.’

‘Thank you,’ said Fred. ‘I’d be most grateful.’

(‘All About Attitude’, story in *Life With Fred*)

484 **When troubles pile up**

When we have a lot of things going on in our lives, particularly things that bother us, here is a very simple strategy: do things in baby steps; that is, tackle one item at a time. If we try to conquer them all at once, they may crush us. If we take one tiny step at a time, we will get there. It can be as basic as this: I am anxious about washing the dishes. Right – I won’t wash the dishes. I will wash one dish. I’ll give myself credit for doing that. Then I will wash one more dish and give myself credit for doing that. Even if I don’t succeed in washing all the dishes, I still give myself credit for the effort not the outcome. Many people would scoff at this simple procedure, saying it is absurd, even childish, and look for something more complex and cerebral. But the ‘baby steps’ strategy has one great thing going for it: it works!

Another way I have heard it put is this: if you want to move a mountain, bring a shovel; if you can’t manage a shovel, bring a teaspoon.

(From a letter, September 2007)

485 **Enraptured**

We dance in every moment,
And I contemplate the wonder ...

Was ever a man so bounteously blessed,
Was ever a man so tenderly caressed
By the mystical in the material,
The timeless transcending the temporal,
My ache and affliction redeeming
Beyond the dominion of dreaming?
Oh, was ever a man so blessed?
For when we kiss, my light and my love,
I know eternity in your touch,
The miracle of your presence
In the human here and now;
And when I enfold you in my embrace,
E'er enraptured by your charms,
I behold all beauty in your face,
And hold heaven in my arms ...

And, every moment, day by day,
The dance goes on.

(‘The Dance Goes On’, poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

486 **No limits on love**

Contrary to widespread belief, the capacity to receive and give love is not limited; it can grow without boundaries. Indeed it is self-generating; the more love we give out to, and receive from, those close to us, our wider circle of friends and acquaintances and the world at large, the more love we generate both within and beyond ourselves. We can say, further, that love *must* expand in order to endure. If we consciously limit love, there is a real danger that what love we have will shrivel rather than grow. It is an unlimited and ever-expanding resource – the more love we appropriate and radiate, the more love we create.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

487 **Heartache**

A heartache to endure each day,
Being close to him that way:
Platonic – truly not her choosing;
Loving him in painful silence,
Often staying in his presence,
Albeit at a careful distance,
But he not loving her,
Or so he seems to say
In a wordless sort of way,
Like oil being close to water –
One distinct from the other,
In proximity yet unable to blend.
Perhaps he's but disguising
The true nature of his feeling;
But that's just wishful thinking,
Makes nearness more distressing,
Breeds unreal expectations
Based on dreamlike self-delusions,
Born of early deprivations,
Bound to end in cruel deceptions;
For it's not the way things really are:
Deeply enamoured she,
Firmly non-committal he –
So near and yet so far,
A heartache to endure each day.

(‘Heartache’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

488 **The sculptor**

There are so many facets to the divine nature of God, that we haven't a hope of getting to know and understand even a few of them. For me, one of those few, and one of the most spectacular manifestations in my life, is that he is the sculptor supreme. An ordinary sculptor transforms raw material into tangible objects of beauty. God transforms misery into miracles.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

489 **A bit of fantasy**

‘I have to tell you, Lucille, that I am still basking in the radiant glow of that superlative compliment you paid me the other day. Normally I would not dream of asking but, in matters of this kind, a little reassurance goes a long way: am I really an okay guy to be around?’

‘Absolutely, my treasured recipient of literary promptings. Where else would I find my calling but in serving one as gifted as you? It would not be over-stating it to say that you have the appearance of Adonis, the Wisdom of Zeus, the strength of Hercules, the gentleness of Venus, the sex-appeal of Eros and the intelligence of some other gifted deity whose name escapes me for the nonce.’

It will come as little surprise to my reader that humility is the essence of my nature; the ups and downs, the uncertainties of life have taught me to be humble. On the other hand, it is healthy and wholesome to appreciate one’s self-worth, and I have always had a good sense of self-esteem. Nevertheless, I thought Lucille had gone over the top – just a tiny bit. As against that, one never looks a gift horse in the mouth, does one? Such eulogies are rare. So you will be indulgent, won’t you, dear reader, and not think too hard of me for wallowing in a fantasy perception of myself for a little while?

(From ‘Eulogy’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

490 **It’s good to be ordinary**

It’s all right, even wonderful, to be ordinary. The big events in life like births, marriages, deaths, moving house and the like are few and far between. So, most things in my life are ordinary; it follows, therefore, that if I can become content with ordinary things, I will be content most of the time. Otherwise I may be tempted to resort to unhealthy, perhaps compulsive, habits to create ‘excitement’, and these habits in turn will destroy me. Should this happen, despite myself, do I have the openness and the courage to admit I have a problem and seek help?

(From *Living With The Blues*)

491 **When all else fails ...**

The walk sure didn't do it,
And the talk sure didn't do it;
Neither did the swimming
Nor an hour of meditation,
A session with a counsellor
And the best of medication.
The fresh-brewed cappuccino
Gave me temporary relief
But the cake that I had with it
Gave my poor digestion grief.
Also thinking positive
Has failed to do the trick
And repeated affirmations,
Hackneyed clichés, made me sick.
A Nobel prize for effort, though,
For I could do no less;
But all, alas, was fruitless
Coz my life's still in a mess.
See, nothing stills the raging storm
That blows inside my head,
Nothing stems the abject fear
That fills my heart with dread
 No, nothing saves the day ...
 I think I'd better pray!

(‘Saving The Day’, poem in *The Power Of Light*)

492 **The value of writing poetry**

Like you, I find poetry a great solace, particularly my own. That's not born of arrogance, rather that I find, very often, that when I read one of my poems some time after composing it, it is much more profound than I had realised at the time of writing, and it moves me deeply, often bringing the tears, which I regard as a great gift. Indeed I feel greatly blessed by having been able to express the inner journey in this way since 1989 when, as I mentioned, I started writing seriously.

(From a letter, May 2003)

493 **God's vocabulary**

So many devotional books that I have come across, some presuming to speak on behalf of God, use language like must, mustn't, should, shouldn't, ought, oughtn't, do, don't, and the like. My God *never* speaks to me like that. He always uses tender words of love and gentle encouragement.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

494 **There's a helpline for everything nowadays**

I could scarcely believe my eyes, but there it was, advertised in the morning paper: a help line for depressed and anxious people, funded by some billionaire philanthropist. It started in America, of course – they are always first with that kind of thing, but now, through a low-cost phone number, they were extending the service to my homeland. I was feeling pretty depressed and anxious at the time, so do you think I could resist calling? Not on your nelly!

After a few rings a gentle, female, recorded voice said, 'Welcome to Beat The Blues Inc. All our lines are busy at present, but you are very important to us, so please hold and one of our therapists will be with you as soon as possible.' I decided to hold on, and had expected to be assailed with the customary tin-can music; no doubt they had chosen something appropriately funereal and gloomy, or perhaps they had gone the opposite direction and would play rousing marches to stir the depressed and anxious soul. Instead, within seconds, a voice started to laugh one of those highly contagious laughs. At first I was taken aback, then I started to chuckle. Before I could take stock of what was going on, I found myself laughing uncontrollably, at high decibels, phone in hand.

After four minutes or of this mirth and hilarity, the recorded laughter died away, to be replaced by soft harp music for about thirty seconds, during which I dried my eyes and managed to stop laughing. Thereupon, a kindly voice said, 'Good morning, Felicity speaking; how may I help?'

By this time I had started to chuckle again. ‘Good morning, Felicity. Ha ha! Actually I don’t need your help at all now. Ha ha! I feel just terrific.’

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘they all say that. Well, thank you for calling, and have a nice life.’

I was so taken with this marvellous therapy that I recommended it to a few of my friends who were even more depressed and anxious than me. They all reacted in the same way, and very soon we had formed a self-help group called Gigglers Unanonymously. The method of recovery was simple: we met once a week in a coffee shop, encouraged the member with the most infectious laugh to go to it with gusto, tickling him or her if necessary, and it would not be long before the entire table was in a paroxysm of mirth – well, the group not the table, if you get my drift. Before long, the other customers would involuntarily join in and, after only a few weeks, the proprietor stopped charging us for the coffee and buns, because we were responsible for filling the place each week at a time that would normally be quiet.

(From ‘What A Way To Go!’, story in *Oh, My Head!*)

495 **Why I write**

*So long as you write what you wish to write,
that is all that matters.*

(Virginia Woolf)*

I no more write with a view to publication than a friend who loves cooking is thinking of opening a restaurant. A small amount of my stuff has been published and more may be so in the future, but that’s not why I create it. I write because it relaxes my body, exercises and explores my mind, gives expression to my emotions and the deepest desires of my heart and, most importantly, because it nurtures my spirit. I write because I have to. I write because I want to.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* 1882–1941. One of the most influential English writers of the twentieth century.

496 **So, is God's way easy?**

Taking into account all the wonder I have been describing in my various writings – miracles, sublime beauty and the like – it's safe to presume that God's way is easy. Is that right? No, it's not. Following in God's way is not easy. In that case, who wants a God like that, one who makes following him difficult? Let's ask ourselves some questions:

- ✧ Is growing up and being educated easy?
- ✧ Is building and developing a career easy?
- ✧ Is maintaining worthwhile relationships easy?
- ✧ Is bringing up a family easy?
- ✧ Is acquiring proficiency at a skill easy?
- ✧ Is dealing with the vicissitudes of life easy?

With rare exceptions, the answer to these questions is 'No, definitely not'. Why, then, should accessing and nurturing something of *infinitely* greater value – one's own personal relationship/oneness with God, one's own eternal life – be easy?

'But,' you protest, 'God can do anything. Of course the ways of the world are difficult; he doesn't seem disposed to change that, but surely he can smooth the path of our spiritual journey.'

Consider the following. Thérèse of Lisieux said:

It is true that at times a very small ray of the sun comes to illumine my darkness, and then the trial ceases for an instant but afterward the memory of this ray, instead of causing me joy, makes my darkness even more dense.

In this instance, she was writing of a time of great suffering in her life, but the principle she illustrates can be applied to the whole of the relationship between the temporal and the eternal. God's way is not just another of the several strands of our human life. It transcends that state by countless light years, even though it is intimately intertwined with it. This sounds like a contradiction, but it isn't. Thus, when we have experienced the wonderment of God's ways, even if only

briefly, human life cannot satisfy to anything like the degree it did before, so the apparent difficulty in following God's ways is actually a yearning for more of what we have found, and the resulting sense of loss or deprivation can be very distressing. And the more we have experienced of God's love, the greater will be the awareness of the disparity between the spiritual and the temporal in times of doubt or tribulation ...

(From 'Is God's Way Easy?', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

497 **Written for the sound of the words**

I cannot hurt forever,
Always grieving;
You said you'd never leave –
Love once conferred –
And I, believing,
Took you at your word,
As if such sly deceiving
I'd never heard
Or seen before.
But, finally perceiving
That truth's not your endeavour,
I could not be deterred
From taking leave
Of my naïve flirtation
With your absurd caprice,
That I'd chosen to ignore,
For scarce did I abhor
This 'trial of love',
Since I was in denial,
Self-deceiving to the core,
Till scales fell from my eyes,
Released me from your subtle lies,
My heartache to relieve.
Now, I will grieve no more.

(‘No More’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

498 **The unsuccessful researcher**

Not infrequently, at around the time I take my night-time cup of cocoa, I thumb through the books of quotations that have accrued to my collection over the years. On the night of which I speak, I spent several hours perusing the various volumes, endeavouring to establish the author of a particular quotation that had been causing me some disquiet in recent times. I had a sneaking suspicion that it was Theodore Roosevelt, Elvis Presley, one or other of the popes, Mahatma Gandhi, the Beatles or Groucho Marx, but could find no documentary evidence. All my researches were designed to underpin the substance of this piece, but I suppose I will simply have to draw consolation from the fact that the majority of my readers will already have encountered the phrase which is about to become the object of my scrutiny, to wit: *God helps them who help themselves.*

Incidentally, before I go any further, if there is any smart ass out there who knows where this quotation comes from, I no longer want to know. Get it? After all my painstaking researches, I don't want to discover that some snivelling little six-year-old just read it in his weekly comic. So, if you have any compassion, leave me in ignorance. Right, then; that's settled.

(From 'What's In A Quotation?', story in *In My Write Mind*)

499 **An 'off' day is okay!**

The other day ... I was at a meeting with a number of wonderful people whom I know well, like and admire. On the way home, I stopped for some time by the canal and contemplated a large community of ducks who were frolicking to and fro in the water. I felt more at home with the ducks than with the people. Admittedly I was feeling particularly 'off' that day, but I still didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this circumstance. I rang a very grounded friend and related the occurrence to him. He replied, "That's okay. There are times when I feel more at home with the dog!"

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

500 **What does *knowledge* mean in the spiritual realm?**

The following is a short extract from my essay ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’ in *Beyond The Rainbow*.

You may wonder why I put *knowledge* in italics. The reason is that when one comes into a knowledge of God, belief, the disposition advocated to the faithful of many religions, which is always open to doubt, can be discarded as a highly unsatisfactory substitute for the real thing: a knowledge, which, with ongoing experience, becomes virtually unassailable.

Does this unassailable knowledge mean I never have times of doubt and fear? No, it does not. Let me offer an analogy: if a castle is impregnable, does that mean it is never attacked, that those inside never have doubts about the ability of the structure to withstand the onslaught, never fear that it might be overrun? Of course not. There will always be attacks, there will always be moments of doubt and fear. But an impregnable castle is – at the risk of insulting your intelligence – impregnable.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

501 **Existential crisis? No thanks**

On the day in question, pessimism ran amok, negativity went on the rampage, fits of despondency proliferated, and confusion did its befuddling thing to an inordinate degree.

‘I think I’ll have an existential crisis,’ I said, dejectedly.

‘A what?’

‘An existential crisis, Lucille. You know the sort of scenario: the meaning of life, what it’s all for, whether my existence has a purpose, and that most burning of all existential questions: Who am I?’

‘And that’s an existential crisis?’

‘Yes, more or less, old thing.’

‘Sounds pretty miserable. What do you want one of those for?’

‘I don’t!’

(From ‘Lucille To The Rescue’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

502 **Self care**

I help others whenever I can, but I don't do it to the point where it drains me emotionally or physically. That would be like lending money I don't have. To put it another way, I cannot give to others if my own internal resources have become depleted. Most importantly, I carry the message of my experience, *not* the person. Mostly, all I have to do is *listen*.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

503 **Spiritual maturity?**

'Spiritual maturity' is a term for which I have never had much time. From my present perspective, I dislike it more than ever.

The very use of the term of necessity implies that some people are more spiritually mature than others, or that some possess spiritual maturity and others do not. This, out of our human nature, leads to comparisons which, though we may struggle against it, feeds what I call 'The cult of competition'* which, in turn, spawns expressions such as 'a man of God', 'a godly woman', 'he/she is very spiritual', 'a holy person', 'he/she is close to God'. This vocabulary, in its own turn, clearly implies that there are those – the majority usually – who have not earned or 'won' this appellation.

As I see it, the only ones who can be described as spiritually mature are tiny babies. Thereafter, it's all downhill! Downhill, that is, until God moves to infuse our subsequent lives with miracles, almost always in tandem with the pain of our humanity. It has nothing whatever to do with our spiritual maturity. The only influence at work here is God's infinite, steadfast, unconditional love. If we have any input at all, it is simply to yearn for this state of things. And whence or, more appropriately, from whom does this yearning come? ...

If 'spiritual growth' or whatever else one chooses to call it means anything, it is (if my experience is anything to go by) to be brought back to a state of childhood, in which I see the wonder of God and his Love and just go, 'Wow!'

It seems that, many centuries later, and coming by a different route, I have arrived at the same conclusion as Julian

of Norwich when she said: *There is in this life no higher state than childhood.*

To my great relief, at this stage of my life (late 2015) I am becoming like a child once again, not intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually. To put it another way, I am becoming childlike, but not childish. This ... can have the effect of making me feel out of step with my fellows but, as I have intimated before, to preserve my equilibrium in all facets of my life, I must dance to the music I hear, not somebody else's tune. Overall, returning to what I call 'childfulness' (in my poem 'The Bluebell') is both a great blessing and, increasingly, a great freedom.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See the essay 'Are we meant to be competitive?' in the collection *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn.

504 **Spiritual leaders/teachers**

We ought not to insist on everyone following in our footsteps, nor to take upon ourselves to give instructions in spirituality when, perhaps, we do not even know what it is.

(Teresa of Ávila)

Because of the hazards of deeming people spiritually mature, I believe there is, equally, enormous danger in the widespread practice of putting finite, human beings on pedestals and describing, and following, them as spiritual leaders/teachers. Much of what they teach may indeed be infused with wisdom, even divinely inspired wisdom. But they are not exempt from human error and, unless their followers have the gift of acute discernment (which, let's face it, most people do not possess) their intermittent, less-than-wise teachings/pronouncements can cause havoc. Indeed the very fact that some of what they teach is imbued with wisdom exacerbates the problem: their followers are lulled into a sense of false security, put what critical faculties they possess on hold, and are then unaware when an unhealthy notion from the leader/teacher takes root in their consciousness.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

505 **Temptation**

(In which the last line doesn't fit properly)

It's not quite two miles
And I wanted to walk;
But it started to rain,
So I called up a taxi
To spare me a soaking,
And bring me on time
To hobnob with friends,
For a plate and a glass,
In a restaurant of class
With an apt reputation
For the best grub in town.
But my humour was crap
Since I ate not a scrap,
Not the tiniest morsel.
And that is the reason
I wanted to walk:
To tone up my appetite
For gastronome treats,
'Cause I'd just had a skirmish,
While brewing some coffee,
With a whole box of sweets,
Namely chocolate and toffee,
That were left on the table
In shameful pursuit
Of licentious temptation.
So I plundered the loot
With no sage hesitation,
No thought of cessation,
No conscience embroiled,
And devoured every chunk;
So my hunger was spoiled
By an orgy of junk.
Now look what I've missed.
I just couldn't resist!
No wonder I'm pissed
Off.

('Couldn't Resist', poem in
No Rest For The Wicked)

506 **Never too late**

It is *never* too late for me to become the person that My God and I have always wanted me to be. All I need is the patience to wait!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

507 **What is grace?**

Up until fairly recently, I had a woolly idea as to what grace is and how it manifests in my life. I think I assumed it to be one of those ineffable gifts God sends our way in times of need, but would have been hard pressed to describe it beyond that. If it means God's love, why don't they say so? Since they do not, at least not that I have read or heard, it presumably means something else.

Now, however, I have become clear. Grace is God's love manifesting in two distinct ways, firstly as *empowerment* in specific areas of my life and, secondly, as *protection*. God loves me unconditionally at all times, but when he expressly channels his love to empower me to do or be what would be impossible for me to do or be on my own, then that is grace. Incidentally, what is it, in my experience, that God empowers me to do? Everything!

Where protection is concerned, how often have I been saved from potentially disastrous situations? Only recently, I was driving in Connemara, and I pressed the clutch pedal to go into a lower gear in order to overtake the car in front of me. However, my size 12 shoe caught the brake pedal and I came to a sudden stop. In the same instant, I glanced in the mirror and saw several cars just behind me; from a half century of driving experience, I knew that there was no way the vehicle immediately behind me could avoid hitting me and causing a multiple car pile-up. In a split second, I saw him, and the other cars, doing the impossible: sailing past me on my right and no impact. In that moment I knew I was protected by God's grace. This is but one example from a lifetime of being protected. I am filled with gratitude.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

508 **Those self-help books ...**

I had been going through an extended and extremely difficult – albeit very beautiful – period spiritually. A trusted friend with whom I shared my journey said, ‘I’m going to lend you a book.’ I thought, ‘Oh no, not another book! Almost everybody I speak to at more than a superficial level recommends a book to sort me out!’

(From ‘The Dark Night Of The Soul’, book review in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

509 **When love is a decision**

‘What ... I have learned, Robert, is that romantic love is absolutely wonderful, indeed essential for bringing a couple together and it is important that it always be present in some measure. But in a mature relationship, love is ultimately a decision.’

‘That sounds a bit cold and clinical.’

‘Yes, it does. But it isn’t. Take all the people in your life that you love. You always love them, right?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘But you don’t always feel loving. In fact there are times when you could happily give them a piece of your mind in a manifestly energetic manner.’

‘You bet!’

‘But even in that moment of desperately wanting to slosh them between the two eyes with a wet sandbag, you still love them, right?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘You know so.’

‘Okay, I know so.’

‘Then you love them, but you don’t *feel* loving. In that moment, love is a decision. It is a decision born of a deep commitment to this person that goes beyond the emotion of the moment to an appreciation and an acceptance of who and what they are, just as they are, right now, and the knowledge that you are in this for the long haul.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

510 **The intrinsic worth of each person**

Many years ago, during a mass I was attending, the priest emphasised whatever point he was making by saying, 'I am nothing, I am nobody ...' I remember thinking to myself, 'Well, I don't know about you but I am a VIP.' To keep the record straight, everybody else, in my view, is a VIP as well.

To proclaim to myself or to the world that I am nothing or nobody would be tantamount to telling God that, in making me, he made a heap of worthless garbage.

Of course, the priest probably meant, 'I am nothing, I am nobody without God.' While that is undoubtedly true, I believe that God is much too generous to want us to see it that way. A car won't operate without fuel but that doesn't detract from its intrinsic worth as a piece of brilliant engineering. Likewise, I am of intrinsic worth; I have my own personality, character, integrity and an indestructible spirit. I am unique. And how did I acquire that uniqueness? From God; he voluntarily chose to create me, then give me an individuality beyond price, which he then proceeds to honour in every possible way. Astounding! Now, for me, this perception of things is much more humbling than any falsely self-deprecating 'I am nothing, I am nobody.' That kind of utterance, though well-intentioned, is an insult to the giver, for it tells him that his gifts are not valued by me.

It is difficult, on the human plane, to believe that any being – even God – could be capable of such cosmic and selfless generosity. But when I look beyond the finite, I see clearly what I mean when I said (elsewhere in this volume), *God doesn't limit us; we limit God.*

Like I said, I am a VIP. So are you.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

511 **Never a dull moment**

I am living a very quiet life – externally that is. The internal life is full of dreams, yearnings, hopes, aspirations, plans, schemes and the inevitable dark clouds; never a dull moment within!

(From a letter, February 2005)

512 **From absurd nonsense to sublime truth**

‘If the love of the Creator for any individual is measured by the inventory of human and material goodies which he decides to dish out arbitrarily – or so it would seem to a confused mind – from the divine warehouse, then he hates the starving, loathes the oppressed, ignores the sick, detests the destitute, scoffs at the handicapped, and has scant regard for the unemployed.’

Fred coughed in embarrassment, but said not a word.

‘It seems, to my limited intelligence, that the only measure of God’s love, is the simple but unshakeable assurance in one’s heart, that despite all the outward circumstances of life, good, bad or indifferent, one is loved with an infinite love beyond human understanding. The ultimate example is that wonderful person – the name escapes me for the moment – whose inspiring response to his experience of the horrors of Nazi concentration camps was: ‘Don’t wrestle, nestle.’ The inner assurance, my dear old companion, that, beyond such horrific circumstances, all is well, constitutes the only lasting security there is.’

(From ‘Yardstick’, story in *Life With Fred*)

513 **Caring about and caring for**

Lovers care deeply *about* each other, and because they feel this way, they then care *for* each other, looking after each other’s needs. With God and me, the equation is a little different. We care deeply about each other, and he cares for me in every conceivable way. In conventional terms, it is not possible for me to care for God; he does not need my care, being totally fulfilled in and of himself. Yet paradoxically, I believe that God is so infinitely loving that he voluntarily *chooses* to need me (and everybody else as well of course) in various ways, such as using me to reach out to others with his love. For a God who is totally fulfilled within himself to choose to need those he has created is mind-blowing, yet this is the way in which I experience him.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

514 **Lucille isn't perfect**

'I say, Lucille, I have just been reading that abstruse poem we wrote last year and I cannot for the life of me remember what it means. Can you come to the rescue?'

'Er ... Um ... let me see ... no, 'fraid not. On this occasion, I very much regret to say, my memory has let me down with a bang. Oh dear, oh dear! Muses are supposed to remember everything. I'll probably get into trouble.'

(From 'Serves Us Right!', story in *Life With Lucille*)

515 **Meditation**

*Not everyone is capable of meditating,
But everyone is capable of loving.*

(Terese of Ávila)

I have never been able to meditate in what I perceive to be the traditional mould, i.e. a particular posture, a mantra, focusing on the breath, stilling the mind and so forth. I found this frustrating over a considerable period of time, and it made me feel that I was missing out. But, in the fullness of time, as with everything else, the God Of My Life led me into my own way of meditating in two distinct ways. [I will mention one of them here.] The first is quite difficult to describe, but I'll have a go. I have been given the ability each day to 'switch' into a different, timeless dimension and to experience there the presence of infinite, unconditional love. And this can happen anytime, anywhere, even – surprisingly – while I am driving. Certain music is conducive to this 'switch' but is not essential. The whole experience is indescribably beautiful ...

I cannot guide others into accessing either of these states because, as I say, they were given to me spontaneously, not acquired through instruction and practice. However, anybody who likewise has not fared well with traditional meditation and is searching, can learn one lesson from my journey: ask God to lead you into a way of meditation that is right for *you* ... Bottom line: there's no wrong way to meditate.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

516 **Most of what we need is within**

Aided and abetted by the co-dependent society in which we live, I have frequently sought direction for my life from outside sources: religion, teachers, television, health professionals, self-help books, vitamin tablets – even the internet. It eventually dawned upon me that, while all of these may well have a role to play, most of what I need is within; all it takes to find it is for me to have the courage to look.

(From 'Introduction' in *Communications – A Course Manual*)

517 **Why God's love cannot be conditional**

Imposing a condition is easy to understand: 'I'll do this for you *if* you do that for me.' Taking the notion a bit further, it means that I have resources from which I can draw to do what you ask of me, and you have separate resources from which you can draw in order to fulfil your side of the bargain, once I have done my bit. In human affairs, that is the way things seem to work, in fact is pretty much the norm.

Let's apply that formula to our relationship with God and see how it turns out. Let us assume, for the moment, that God's love is conditional in the sense described in the foregoing paragraph. Right, I pray (i.e. ask) for something that I perceive myself to need, let us say a resolution to a serious financial problem. God listens, then responds, 'Okay, I am willing to help, but first you must get a better-paying job, work extra hours at some secondary activity to bring in more income, sell the silver collection that your great grandfather passed on as family heirloom, then dispose of your car and buy an old banger. Engage in discussions with your creditors and talk to the bank. When you have done all that, I will see what I can do for you.' Let's put it more simply: 'When you have used *your* power to see what you can do, then I will use *my* power to take it further, but only then.'

I am sure you saw this coming! From what source do I get 'my' power? See? Everything I have and am comes from God, from the next breath to the greatest achievement. God would never talk to me in the way I have used to illustrate my

point. What he would say (to paraphrase) in my experience, is: 'My beloved one, use the gifts I have already given you, and when they run out, I will come with more gifts – maybe not in your way and time, for my ways are light years beyond your comprehension, but I will *always* come.' I may have to do some or all of the things I mentioned in order to sort out my financial problem, but the power to do them comes from him, not me.

So God's love could only be conditional if he were to insist that I first do/be things with a power that comes from some other source than him. And that's impossible. There is no other source.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

518 **Give up the search**

Stop seeking God – that sounds perverse,
But he'll his covenant keep;
For him the search is in reverse –
The shepherd finds the sheep.

(‘Let Go’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

519 **Save us from pomposity**

The emerging intelligentsia of the university's prestigious English department were already elated by the intoxicating power the year's studies had conferred upon their absorbent minds – that of analysing and questioning virtually every item of knowledge presented for their enlightenment. Nothing, they were informed by their lecturers, should be accepted at face value, lest they be considered naïve by their peers and mentors – the ultimate insult, apparently. The pinnacle of academic satisfaction, therefore, was derived from systematically dissecting the works of others, and consigning them arbitrarily to the intellectual grave or placing them upon the pedestal of genius, depending on the prevailing school of thought, the fashionable notions of the epoch and the personal quirks of self-styled experts.

(From ‘Dissection’, story in *When The Bug Bites*)

520 **What is it about Connemara?**

I have been asked, on occasion, what it is that I find in Connemara (and Máméan in particular) that I don't find anywhere else. There are many beautiful, even spectacular landscapes in Ireland, let alone the rest of the world. So what is it about Connemara? The first time somebody posed this question, I reflected quietly for a few moments, then responded, 'I find a mystical quality in Connemara that I can find nowhere else.' By this I mean that, for me, the mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers, streams and trees, the animals and birds, bear witness to an otherworldliness, to another dimension, to the eternal – to something deep inside me that knows there is more. Beyond that, I would be hard put to express it in words. Far better just to experience it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

521 **Saved? From what?**

Now there's an intriguing issue: salvation. We are all, so we are told, in need of being saved. Saved from what? Saved from our own sinfulness? Saved from the human condition? Saved from the way God made us? Interesting!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

522 **Forgotten talents**

'Are you there, Lucille?'

'But of course. At your service as always. What can I do for you today?'

'Actually, it's not so much what I would like you to do, rather that I have acquired some information on my younger life, about which I had completely forgotten, and which you might find interesting.'

'I find everything about you interesting, so spill the beans.'

'... It's like this: my supply of nine hundred hard copies of *Pieces Of Mind*, second edition, has nearly run out, so I decided to make a downloadable version available to the past

pupils of my secondary boarding school, which I left in 1959. They send out a monthly e-newsletter, and I thought this would be a suitable vehicle to distribute the book further. Anyway, to get to the point, I heard from several of my contemporaries, of whom I have seen or heard nothing for over fifty years. One of them says he recalls that I was a pianist who used to play for them. Another, who remembers me from our primary boarding school as well, says that there I used to play the banjo and sing to them.'

'Whew! You're kidding,' gasped Lucille.

'Huh?'

'You mean that, in addition to your many other talents, you were a pianist, a banjo player and a boy soprano. Wow! I'm wildly impressed.'

My ego whispered in my ear to lap up this adulation and milk it for all it was worth. My better nature reminded me, however, that Lucille reveres the truth, and so, when all is said and done, does my better nature. Nevertheless, my ego can be a pretty tenacious and stubborn little bastard, for which reason, as my reader can readily imagine, there was a brief but fraught skirmish between these two opposing internal factions – might versus right, you could say. I am happy to report that right won.

I have to tell you Lucille, that, in describing me as a pianist, my former schoolmate was suffering from euphoric recall. I was, at best, a mediocre key-thumper who could play oompah-pah chords to a few simple popular melodies, limited, I might add, to the keys of C, F and G. As for the banjo, it was of the ukulele variety with only four strings, so was easier to learn. My performance and range thereon were similar to that on the piano. And to describe me as a boy soprano is definitely gilding the lily. The best that can be said of me is that I could warble a few airs, more or less in tune.'

You know how it is when you make a clean breast of things. You feel sort of all purified and noble on the inside. The faithful who go to confession experience much the same thing, no doubt.

(From 'Stock-in-trade', story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

523 **The most useful letter?**

A useful letter 'X' is
For many hats it wears,
Playing noughts and crosses
And filling questionnaires.
Alphabets include it,
And use it now and then;
The Saviour it abbreviates;
In Roman times 'twas ten.
It renders homework ugly
When marked with glum corrections;
Its magic rays scan inwards
To demonstrate infections.
It marks the buried treasure,
And makes the purists shiver
By shortening words like 'Christmas'
(The season of the giver).
It waxes incognito
A secret to disown,
And acts, in apt equations,
As a quantity unknown.
It graces sundry bank cheques,
And tells where roads cross tracks,
Labels deadly poison
And movies sadly lax.
'X', in divers places,
Gets politicians passed,
But keeps a careful vigil,
And turfs them out as fast.
Some folks are illiterate;
It helps to hide their shame –
They simply mark a little 'X'
To represent their name.
But the best of all its functions,
And claims to fame is this:
It comforts parted lovers
When it signifies a kiss.

(‘X’, poem in *Thomas Matthews, A Selection*)

524 **Willingness – the key to change**

I enjoyed our chat on the morning of my departure. We somehow became quite philosophical, didn't we? I promised to send you a reminder of the few things we discussed. I made some notes of what we said on my way home and have added a few items that struck me since my return that might be useful.

The main topic was about when I need to make changes in my life. The first and most important thing I need to do is change my *attitude*. But if I have been thinking one way for years, and I now need to change that attitude, it may be quite difficult. So I start by simply *making a decision* to change my attitude. When I make a decision to change, nothing happens immediately (I told you the story of the three frogs on a large lily leaf; one makes a decision to jump off; how many are left? Answer: three. It only made a decision to jump off!). But when I make a decision to change, it means that I am *willing* to change. Willingness is the most important quality we need to bring to anything we want to achieve. So when I need to make a difficult change, it is like facing a heavy, locked door. But when I make the decision to change (my attitude or whatever), it indicates that I am willing and *willingness is the key* that opens the door to that change. It may be slow, but once I am willing, changes will begin to happen little by little; after a while, I will be able to look back and say, 'Wow! I don't think like I used to, or I don't feel like I used to. This works!' Patience is very important here. We don't achieve major changes in our attitudes overnight.

So, now that I'm willing, how do I begin the change? I just take the first step. If that's the wrong one, I take another step. I learn from ones that don't work out. I give it a try; thirty years from now we will be more disappointed by the things we didn't do than by the ones we did. Here's an old proverb: a journey of a thousand kilometres begins with one step. Another thought I like is this: if I want to move a mountain, I bring a shovel; if a shovel is too heavy, I bring a teaspoon!

(From a letter, June 2015)

525 **Taking away or giving?**

An analogy: I may have a very old three-piece suite in my lounge that needs replacement even though I still find it cosy and comfortable. Through God's generosity, a magnificent new one is to be provided for me. Part of this process is that the old one, however revered, must be removed to make room for the new one. However, there the analogy ends. With a three-piece suite, I know the new one is coming *before* I dispose of the old one and, if I am smart, I will arrange for the delivery men to deliver the new one and take away the old one at the same time so there is no uncomfortable transition period.

With God's gifts, it has mostly been my experience that the old one is always disposed of *before I even know* that it is to be replaced by a new one – and, in My God's scheme of things, one that is always astonishingly better. The result is an apparent vacuum and attendant distress during the transition period.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

526 **Evolving into an optimist**

'I'm not sure that I'd go through it all again, Fred – in the highly unlikely event of being given the option, of course. No, I don't think I would. No, now that I come to think of it, definitely not. No way!'

'Go through all what again?'

'Life, Fred, life. I mean to say, the journey across the sea of existence – if one might compare the passage of life to a voyage on the foamy brine – has been a decidedly fascinating one, but included rather too many barely submerged rocks and stretches of shark-infested water for my liking. However, always an optimist, well, almost always an optimist, I have no doubt that the future contains numerous paradise islands and tranquil seas by the score, and I'm looking forward to every single one of them. All in all, it's good to have got this far in one piece ...'

(From 'Hindsight', story in *Life With Fred*)

527 **Giving the reader a piece of my mind**

Look here, blasted reader, who asked you to interrupt? This is no time for getting technical and making yourself thoroughly disagreeable with all this unseemly scepticism. You can see how upset I am. I know bloody well that Muses don't have a physical presence under normal circumstances, but if you'd been paying attention to these chronicles, you would have learned by now that Lucille possesses a mystical ability to manifest in tangible albeit invisible form when the chips – my chips – are down. Now buzz off and leave me in peace.

(From 'Leave It To Lucille ...', story in *Life With Lucille*)

528 **We don't usually see fairies this way**

'More than that, if it's okay to say so, Jasmine, you are very sexy. I mean that in the best possible sense of course; no ulterior motive here. Purely an objective observation.'

'Sexy? What's sexy?'

'Holy smoke! Don't they teach you anything in Fairyland?'

'Oh yes, that! I'd quite forgotten.' She paused for a minute or so. Then, when the penny dropped, she gasped, 'You ... you mean ... you really think I'm sexy?'

'Yes, definitely. No question about it.'

She blushed profusely. As a matter of fact, at that moment she was the pinkest fairy I have ever come across. Actually, she is the only fairy I have ever come across, but you get the picture.

(From 'Mirth And Moisture', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

529 **In the end ...**

One of my favourite people – Julian of Norwich, an Englishwoman and mystic from about 1400 AD – said, *In the end, everything will be love*. I was going to say 'I believe that', but the truth is that I *know* it deep down in a realm beyond the intellect and it has nothing to do with belief.

(From a letter, May 2003)

530 **God is a giver**

A friend lent me a video entitled *River Of Love* – about the life of Amma ... an extraordinary Hindu mystic and humanitarian. Her first words on the video were:

God doesn't need anything from us. He is a giver. He gives like the sun. The sun doesn't need light from a candle.

I was profoundly moved. I have never heard it put so beautifully. She goes on to say:

God is a subjective experience that is beyond the intellect, that is pure experience. God is pure experience, just like electricity. You cannot see electricity, but you can feel it.

She's right.

However, in reality God does seem to *ask* much of us: love, faithfulness, and often suffering and loss. But surely this is only so that we might grow and mature spiritually ourselves, not in order to give him anything in the normal sense of giving. Yet I do believe that God rejoices when we say 'yes' to his way and he receives from us in this sense. But, ultimately, he only asks us to give so that we might grow and mature and come to that place in our innermost selves where we can receive even more abundantly from him. He is indeed a giver.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

531 **Down to earth!**

Yet, it has been impressed on me
By those who would direct me,
Since my days of early childhood,
To seek heavenly perfection
Over worldly limitation,
Let the cost not be considered.
So, I left no path untrodden
In my searching and my seeking;
And ... Oh! All I found was *me*,
In my ordinary humanity
With its faults and all my failings ...

(From 'Do Not Seek', poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

532 **Reassurance – and the origin of Lucille’s name**

‘It has often struck me, Lucille, that your name seems of relatively recent vintage. I don’t ever recall a Lucille in ancient texts.’

‘Actually my original name was Erato. My father assigned me the job of being a Muse to those who wished to write love poems but, over the centuries, I have crossed the boundaries into other types and styles too. That is why I think I suit you so well. Oh dear, I am being presumptuous. I do suit you, don’t I?’

I marvelled at her modesty. ‘My precious Lucille, if I had drawn up my own detailed specification for a Muse, you would have surpassed it by a million miles.’

‘Oh good. Thank you so much for saying that. It’s a great relief.’

Even goddesses need affirmation and reassurance I thought to myself, and this endeared Lucille to me even more, but I didn’t voice the sentiment.

‘Besides,’ she added, a dreamy look stealing across her face, it was you who gave me the name Lucille ... Lucille comes from the Latin word ‘Lux’ which means ‘Light’. I know that your choice of that name was no accident, which signifies – and I am truly overwhelmed at the honour – that you regard me as your light when you write.’ She sighed a soulful sigh.

(From ‘Light Conversation’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

533 **Therapy**

If this little book meant something to you, I should be happy to hear from you ... If, on the other hand, you thought it was all a load of garbage, may I suggest that you write me a long letter detailing your criticisms; be sure to check the spelling and punctuation as these things are important. Read it over thoroughly several times to ensure that you have covered everything adequately, then tear it into little pieces and put it in your waste paper bin. That way you get it off your chest and I don’t get offended – very therapeutic for both of us!

(From the Introduction to *Oh, My Head!*)

534 **Living in the past?**

Nowadays, I only go down the mineshaft when I perceive that I will find something down there that is truly worth mining – in other words a gem from the past that can become a jewel in the present. At all other times, my choice is to stay above ground, preferably in the sunlight. At least, that's my policy most of the time. Sometimes I can dig for stuff which would have been better left undisturbed. But I'm only human; that's allowed! As always, it's progress not perfection I aim for.

Many respected authors today, notably Eckhart Tolle, advocate living totally in the present. The first line of the introduction to his book, *The Power Of Now*, is: 'I have little use for the past and rarely think about it.' He is very highly thought of worldwide, and one has to respect that. But I have a question: if I had a huge deposit which had been lying in a bank vault for decades, and I was in need, would I ignore it because I was living in the now? That's money; but for me, the same question goes for precious memories that can nurture in the present.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

535 **Happiness comes from within**

It's healthy for me to remember that other people and situations can enrich my life, but they cannot bring me happiness. If I assume that I won't be happy until I find the right partner, right employer, right friends, right place to live, right car, or whatever, I am setting myself up for a fall, because other people, places, things and situations will constantly let me down. In the case of people, it is – mostly – not because they are bad or unhelpful; it is simply because they are humans who have limitations, as we all do, and cannot live up to my demands or expectations. My happiness comes from within, and begins to evolve when I am willing to look at *my* values and perceptions – and particularly when I find and accept the spiritual dimension within myself.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

536 **Knowledge and understanding**

Knowledge and understanding are not the same. Knowing something does not necessarily mean that I understand it. I can know I love somebody but not understand why. If I have never studied science I may still know, as an item of general knowledge, that new plant growth each spring has to do with sun, water and soil nutrients, but not understand why. I know electricity provides me with all sorts of essential and nonessential services; all I have to do is harness it, but I don't understand this strange energy at all.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

537 **Encouraging another writer**

Do keep up the writing. I am sure it will be good to you in many ways that you cannot now foresee – especially in the gift of seeing your innermost thoughts and emotions taking shape on paper, almost like giving them a life of their own. Then they will always be there for you and for those with whom you choose to share them.

I came across a quotation from C.S. Lewis the other day which I really liked. (Lewis was one of the twentieth-century's best known and loved religious writers; also former professor of English at Cambridge. The movie *Shadowlands* was about an aspect of his life.) He wrote: 'To say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that is the whole art and joy of words.'

I believe to get real joy out of our writing, that's all we have to do – say what we want to say, not what we think others might like us to say. For me, it's a question of writing my truth, based on what I observe both inside and outside myself, and this can range from the hilarious to the romantic, from the offbeat to the despairing and from the carnal to the spiritual. Beyond sometimes having roughly hewn ideas, I rarely wait to find out what the truth of the moment is, but put pen to paper and let the writing tell me what it is. I didn't plan this way of doing things; it just evolved.

(From a letter, June 1999)

538 **An adult child's grief**

Oh Dad, you ditched my teddy bear
When we moved o'er the water;
You made an end of my best friend,
You led him to the slaughter.
The city dump, as like as not,
Was his ignoble tomb;
An unkind fate for one child's mate,
For you were to presume
That, lest he were to disappear,
I'd ne'er my kinship quit –
No baby's toy for a growing boy,
So you got rid of it.
You faked his 'accidental' loss
When we our roots transplanted
From Woodmere's door to Kerry's shore.
Thence, firm but disenchanting,
I did my best to grow up fast,
As one so unbeguiled would;
Now, decades on, grief late descends:
You took away my childhood.

(*Lost In Transit*, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

539 **Many years a-growing**

I met a friend the other day and, in the course of the conversation, she told me that two of her children, now in their thirties, had recently been having an argument conducted along the childish lines they would have adopted twenty or more years earlier.

'It takes humans an awful long time to grow up, doesn't it?' I observed.

She gave me a look that indicated she found the remark critical of her two adult children, therefore offensive, but broke into a broad smile when I added the postscript:

'How I know this to be the case is that, at three score years and whatever, I'm still trying to grow up!'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

540 **So that's progress, is it?**

So much has changed. The horse and carriage are no more. One can travel to the far side of the world in twenty-four hours and a device called the computer dominates almost everything. It is sad, my love, that here in what is called the West, the standard of living has never been better and the quality of life never worse. We have evolved a society of instant gratification where people want everything now, heedless of the cost to individuals, the fabric of society and the ecological balance of the planet. In order to indulge this unwholesome desire, life gets faster and faster, whizzing by like a blurred landscape seen from a high-speed train that daily gathers momentum and nobody seems able to stop it. The sole objective of this mindless exertion appears to be to satisfy the slightest whim while, elsewhere, millions die for want of a cup of water. And they call it progress. Oh dear!

(From 'Of Love And Timelessness', story in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

541 **The promised land**

For the promised land is not a geographical location,
Not a country, nor a province,
Not a church, nor a temple,
Neither a collection of possessions,
A string of titles,
Nor the adulation of men;
Rather a state of mind which springs from the heart,
Nourished by the spirit.

(From 'The Promised Land', poem in *Hang On!*)

542 **It's okay to be an 'appropriate' loner**

We have talked before about the characteristics of being a loner. I am finding, in the last few months, that I am becoming increasingly grateful for being just that – remembering that 'loner' does not mean 'isolationist'. I love good companionship and conversation of my choosing, but I am very content in my own company for much of the time.

(From a letter, December 2004)

543 **Nature nurtures**

If it's love that you profess,
To behold a love that's bliss,
To possess its tender kiss,
Let the countryside caress,
Feel the warmth of its embrace;
Let the landscape speak of love,
Ever wordless, ever wondrous,
In the rivers and the seas,
In the wilderness and trees,
In the mountain and the meadow,
In the sunlight or in shadow,
In the winds that softly sing,
In the bird as it takes wing,
In the single flower that grows,
In the fragrance of a rose;
For there is no other lover
That will love us with such passion,
Or enrapture with its beauty,
Or enamour with its aura.
No, there is no other lover
In the mystery of creation
That will nurture us like Nature.

(‘Love Is All Around’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

544 **Euphoric recall**

‘The bloke in the coffin up there, or what’s left of him now that his spirit’s done a bunk, was a no-good reprobate – sex maniac, wife-beater, drug-peddler, car thief, forger and drunken bum, and they were among his nicer characteristics. But to hear the man on the altar talking, you’d swear he was the greatest saint that ever lived, and the assembled mourners are all nodding their heads in sombre approval. The whole thing’s thoroughly sickening. Why is it, Fred, that we humans have a penchant for glorifying even the greatest assholes once they’ve bitten the dust?’

(From ‘Departure’, story in *Life With Fred*)

545 **Can't or won't?**

Sometimes, when feeling bad, we can tell ourselves that we can't do this or can't do that. Usually, however, it's more a question of 'won't'. Let me give you a simple, imaginary example. You are feeling very low one evening and exhausted from emotional turmoil during the day. A friend calls and asks you to go for a good walk with her. You reply 'I can't; I'm exhausted; I couldn't walk if you paid me.' So instead the friend just asks you to walk across the street to the small park to get a breath of air with her. You don't want to, but you think you might just manage this much. So your brain gives the initial command to your muscles to take the few steps across the road, but the same brain is still saying, 'I can't; I'm exhausted; I couldn't walk if you paid me.' When you walk outside, you find that it is a particularly fine evening and the friend engages you in pleasant conversation. You stop to admire the flowers in the park and walk to the other side of it, in conversation all the time. After you get to the other side of the park, the friend says, 'Why don't we go to the coffee shop down the main street and have a coffee and cake?' You are now feeling a good deal better and agree, even though the coffee shop is over a kilometre down the street and you have already walked well over half a kilometre. When you are sitting in the coffee shop, the friend says 'I thought you said you couldn't walk – we've just come nearly two kilometres!' Your eyes open wide in surprise, and you say 'So we have!' The muscles know better than the brain, it seems!

(From a letter, November 2007)

546 **False values**

According to our 'western civilisation',
If one can justify such appellation,
Men must always act and be in motion
And make no show of 'unmanly' emotion.
Women may sit at home and hearth and cry,
While men go uncomplainingly to war and die.

(From 'The Price Of Pretence', poem in *Overdoing It!*)

547 **The nature of the subconscious?**

I have often read and heard about the power of the subconscious. Indeed I have more than once, in earlier years, wondered whether I have a devious subconscious causing much of the pain I have experienced in my life. This led me to believe that my subconscious had evolved a life of its own and could make decisions to render life difficult for me or otherwise as it chose. I now see that stance as questionable. The subconscious is a gigantic video and audio recorder that records sights, sounds, feelings and other sensations, and may even be capable of recording things outside its immediate field (e.g. through the collective unconscious) and also from the realm of the spirit. It is an astonishingly sophisticated recorder. On the face of it, it doesn't seem to have agendas or a decision-making process of its own, but I readily acknowledge, having carefully examined my own experience, that practitioners of psychosomatic medicine claim very convincingly that the unconscious (the word they use) will often take action to protect us from powerful emotions which may be too painful for us to deal with, by diverting our attention with physical symptoms.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See, for example, *The Divided Mind* by John E. Sarno MD.

548 **Serenity in Nature**

... out and about, one afternoon in early summer, imbibing the intoxicating fresh air and drinking in the breathtaking scenery, both provided in abundance by a benevolent higher power. After a long, healthy ramble through the countryside, we had come to rest on a grassy mound overlooking the silver waters of the lake. A gentle breeze was wafting across its rippling surface which was punctuated here and there by a goodly number of the resident swans, and a dozen or so cygnets were frolicking innocently hither and thither. The entire scene was, as you can imagine, one of peace and tranquillity – balm to the soul and all that sort of thing.

(From 'Swan Lake', story in *In My Write Mind*)

549 **A noisy generation**

‘People today don’t seem to be able to tolerate even a modicum of peace and quiet. I have come to the conclusion that they just can’t stand the sound of silence. Why do you think this is, esteemed Muse – a sign of the times perhaps?’

Lucille’s wisdom is often simple but sublime. She thought for a moment and then came up with an answer which took a couple of seconds to sink in: ‘I suppose,’ she said, ‘it’s because the silence is too loud for them; blots out their ability to keep running from themselves.’

(From ‘The Sound Of Silence’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

550 **My taste in reading material**

A good friend of mine was telling me recently that she had a ‘misspent youth’ reading nineteenth-century novels. That makes two of us, although there are surely many others scattered about the planet. Where I differ from my friend, it seems, is that I – now in my early sixties – am still reading them! I fell madly in love with Jane Austen on reading *Persuasion* as a fifteen-year-old and the love affair continues. I have read all her books several times and own dramatised versions of them all on DVD, which I watch regularly. I like some of Dickens’ novels (particularly *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*) and I also like the Brontës; indeed Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre* is my all-time favourite story. The most beautifully written book I have ever read is *Middlemarch* by George Elliot. Another favourite is supposedly a children’s book, which I didn’t read until my mid-fifties: *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri.

My constant companion is P.G. Wodehouse, probably the twentieth century’s greatest humorous writer (he created the Jeeves and Wooster characters). What I love about his work is that he has no message for the world, no mission to convert the masses to some personal point of view, no controversial axe to grind. He simply purveys a wealth of good, clean fun. He wrote about ninety books and I have most of them!

(From ‘Impression And Expression’, essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

551 **Gratitude for a special friendship; and eagles**

We had one of those lovely friendships where a long time would elapse between phone calls, but when we spoke we simply took up where we left off as if it had only been the day before since we last chatted, and I am sad not to have had the chance to speak to her once again before she left us. It must be nearly two years since we last telephoned. I am greatly enriched through having known her – her gift to me was always unconditional love, ever since you had the insight and kindness to put me in touch with her ... And her gift to me can never be taken away from me. Additionally I still have some beautiful tangible memories of her. As I write, I have a picture of an eagle on the wall near me and also, on a nearby shelf, her husband's pocket watch which has an eagle motif on the cover – both of which she sent to me. She knew that eagles are a powerful spiritual symbol for me.



Coincidentally (are there any coincidences in God's world? I think not.) I happened, not even knowing that her husband had been ill, to make one of my phone calls to her, on the very night of his funeral. When she told me, I became deeply concerned to know how she was faring, but she was more interested in how I was, and put her own grief aside in order to be there for me. But that was the extraordinary measure of her unconditional love which I experienced on so many occasions.

(From two letters, April & August 2005)

552 **Well now, fancy that!**

An aunt told me recently (2012) that when I was about twelve years of age, I said to her one day, 'I wonder who my future wife is, and where she is, and what she is doing now.' As it turns out, her name was Carmel, she was eight and living in Dublin. What precisely she was doing at the time I was wondering about her remains a mystery though!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

553 **When we've lost our way, God knows how we feel**

I have known shadow, I have known sun

And now I know these two are one.

(Rudyard Kipling)

It seems you've now concluded
That I'm leaving you to suffer
In the warp and weft of everyday existence,
And the anguish 'comes unbearable
And the cloth of life unwearable,
With no meaning which to pain might give a purpose,
As if I'm adding injury to inexplicable insult,
And the outcome is: no more can you endure,
For despair's destroyed the textile of your substance
And repair appears the stuff of mere delusion.
Am I right?

Yet, how can you believe that
Of the me you've come so close to,
So much closer than the essence of your spirit,
When you've seen the golden fibres
And the jewels of many wonders
That I've woven through the fabric of your being
And entwined within the strands of your affliction,
Especially since I freed you from restriction?

No, I chide not nor chastise you,
For my purpose, in all loving,
Is to take away your temporary blindness,
That, though daily intermingled
With the coarser threads and textures,
You will always see the gems of my affection ...
Oh yes, my love, and even in the dark.

(*'Even In The Dark'*, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

554 **When spirituality seems not to sustain**

What to do when the going gets so rough that even my spirituality doesn't seem to sustain me, when even doubt about the existence of God edges its way into my mind and spirit? I don't know. What I do know is that this is an extremely distressing state to be in.

In balance, perhaps the best way forward is to resist looking for knowledge of the cosmic plan, the overall design, and simply ask for the next right step – whether thought or action. And it is important to do this even in those despairing moments when I wonder if there is a God. In this context, I really like a gnostic prayer that I came across a while ago, and I use it in those times of anguish and confusion:

I have been apart and I have lost my way ... And in my hours of darkness when I am not even sure there is a Thou hearing my call, I still call to Thee with all my heart. Hear the cry of my voice, clamouring from this desert, for my soul is parched and my heart can barely stand this longing.

A final word: given the incredibly beautiful spirituality that is God's gift to me, and has been for many years, should I feel bad, even guilty, when I doubt God's existence? Not at all. A passage from my novel *Black On Magenta* puts it this way:

'Doubt is as much a part of life on Earth as the changing of the seasons; but the time must come in the course of our evolution when we learn to deal with doubt rather as we might treat an insignificant head cold. Just take a simple remedy, then let it run its course.'

'A simple remedy? Meaning what, in this instance?'

'Surrendering to higher wisdom, David. When you do this, no matter how troublesome the doubt, the trusting will be done for you until your situation returns to normal.'

Right, that's done then; I've committed my thoughts on this topic to paper. Now, what's the next right step?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

555 **I'm not always up front**

In a significant number of my pieces, all of them relatively simple, there are messages encoded which I understand but which I would not wish others to be able to comprehend, usually because the encoded message deals with astonishingly beautiful spiritual 'perfumes' which would lose their fragrance if exposed to the air ... The prime example of this desire to preserve the encoded message intact is the autobiographical novel I am currently working on, *Black On Magenta*.^{*} It is autobiographical because I wish to tell my story, and a novel in order to protect my privacy by camouflaging the story heavily, making many of the facts indistinguishable from fiction, so that only those close to me will be able to decode them relatively accurately. In this way, my story is told, but my perfume retains its fragrance.

(From 'Now You See Me, Now You Don't', essay in
When The Bug Bites)

* Later completed.

556 **The price of success**

So I moved to the big city and was offered, almost immediately, a top job with a large multinational corporation. The net result was that, over the next three decades, I acquired a host of things that I badly needed: a big car (the company was image-conscious), a sumptuous mansion with the right address, status in vast quantities; loads of upmarket friends who loyally came to consume, at great personal inconvenience, my lavish supply of whiskey, Champagne and chateau-bottled wines at my weekly cocktail parties; membership of the best clubs, a holiday villa on the Algarve, a cleaning lady, a valet, upgraded computer, upgraded stereo, upgraded television and video, an inlaid cabinet full of Valium and blood-pressure tablets; and, finally, those three supreme symbols of success: the man-of-the-year award, weekly consultations with a psychoanalyst and a triple bypass operation.

(From 'Progress', story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

557 **Don't let anyone suppress your dreams**

'Now yield to bounden duty
And all prescribed observance.
Suppress your carnal nature
And make every day a sacrifice
Of service to your fellows;
Then suffer on in silence
And do not count the cost,
For that is what's ordained.'
But what about my dreams?
'Your dreams? What dreams?
It's time for you to waken;
There is no dream fulfilment
For the human likes of you.
Huh! Dreams indeed!
The petty stuff of fantasy
That best befits a child ...'

(From 'Dreams Indeed!', poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

558 **Gratitude aplenty**

'So let me ask you: what do you consider to be your greatest compliments, achievements and privileges. Take your time now; this a weighty question.'

'No need,' I replied without hesitation, 'for I was pondering this very question only the other day. With your indulgence, esteemed Muse, I will cite three of each, though I could cite many more. The three greatest compliments were to have the Creator think me worth making, the day my wife said 'Yes', and the occasion on which you told me that, in me, you had found your ultimate career fulfilment. The three achievements: the pinnacle is having played an essential part in giving the gift of life to four new human beings; having done worthwhile work with many hundreds of young people, and third, all this writing that you have inspired. And the privileges: being alive, being loved, and having seen the four new human beings grow into wonderful young adults.'

(From 'Bless Us', story in *Life With Lucille*)

559 **More gratitude**

‘Lucille, my treasure, I have kept the best wine until last, and what I have to say will undoubtedly ring true to your ears, for I merely ask you to recall earlier conversations. The greatest compliment, achievement and privilege, all rolled into one, is that the Creator has an eternity of unsullied happiness lined up for you and for me and for all our loved ones, where the grief and loss of this existence will be washed away as running water sluices toothpaste off a toothbrush.’ With hindsight, I can see that the toothpaste simile was pretty ghastly. Regrettably, at that point, however, the universe temporarily ran short of semantic nudges. But what of it? I had delivered the goodies and that’s what mattered.

(From ‘Bless Us’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

560 **The angel never lets me down, despite my doubt**

I’m so glad that she was there,
Or I was definitely sunk.
I thought she’d done a bunk
And left me to my fate,
But she’d never do a thing like that
And she’s never a moment late.
She couldn’t leave me flat –
Even if she tried;
That sort of behaviour
Simply does not figure
In her portfolio of possibilities.
I wonder how I ever
Could have come to the conclusion
That she’d leave me in the lurch?
I besmirch her reputation
With such cockeyed speculation.
Oh, I of little faith!

(From ‘When Will I Ever Learn?’, poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

561 **Being real**

‘But, but ... I mean to say ... Take that wonderful novel of yours. It’s sure to be a runaway bestseller, and ...’

‘FRED!’

‘Okay, okay, point taken! Only trying to help.’

‘I appreciate that!’ I responded, ‘but I cannot let you tempt me to make an excursion into the realm of sheer fantasy from which I would undoubtedly emerge, crestfallen and dispirited, after the manuscript had done the rounds of the literary agents and/or publishing houses and got the universal thumbs down. But, hold on a second! I am doing myself an injustice here. It is a most beautiful story, and to suppose that not even one editor will see its worth is rank pessimism. That, surely, from the psychological standpoint, is worse than indulging in flights of fantasy ...’

(From ‘No Self-Delusion?’, story in *Life With Fred*)

562 **Praising God**

I have often heard it said that praise is the highest form of prayer. I have never felt comfortable with this, and struggled with it for many years. On the one hand God is presented as a God of infinite and unconditional love, as a faithful shepherd who steadfastly attends to the needs of his sheep – both very intimate images of his relationship with us. On the other hand, the same God, who is fulfilled in and of himself, tells us to praise him. Why does he need this adulation, this homage, this appeasement? Not for one instant could I conceive of a good earthly parent requiring these attentions ...

Eventually I went in search: *The Chambers Dictionary* does give the more usual definitions of ‘praise’ but the very first entry reads ‘to express admiration or approval of’ – from the Latin *pretiare*, to prize.

Now I have no difficulty. It is easy for me to express admiration or approval of the God of my understanding. It is not appeasement, just an acknowledgement of the truth: he is a great and wonderful God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

563 **God's forgiveness?**

If there is forgiveness, one assumes that there must first be, in the heart and mind of God, a recognition of the wrong perpetrated. In this case, forgiveness is a statement such as, 'I recognise the wrong you have done, but I fully release you (and me) from it.'

But since God is the God of unconditional love ... he actually does not condemn me for my faults, nor does he need to release himself from them. He loves us unconditionally in the fullest sense of that word, and is not bound by our shortcomings. Yet I have this innate sense that I need forgiveness from time to time and that I feel greatly healed when I receive it, as I always do. So God understands *our* need for forgiveness and, therefore, lets us experience his love, at such times, as forgiveness – or, a term I much prefer: as his healing love.

It must only be that God is in a permanent state of loving me which means that he has no spare capacity for recognising or storing the fault. Or, put more as I have come to know it in the core of my spirit, God is constantly radiating his infinite, steadfast, unconditional love to me and, at appropriate times, I experience it as forgiveness. All that remains, then, is the sometimes difficult task of forgiving myself, and even this is but a decision; The implementation comes from God himself. Such Love!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

564 **Finding treasure where we least expect it**

This morning, however, despite the pain, I was able to write spontaneously in my notes: 'The darkness is one of the most sacred places I have ever been.'

If you had told me just over three years ago ... that I would see things that way now, I wouldn't have believed you. Yet I can see plainly that my darkness has either produced or been the catalyst of so much beauty, wonder and miracles in my own life and in the lives of others.

(From a letter, October 2003)

565 **Me? Odd? Maybe, maybe not**

‘But I want those state-of-the-art stereo headphones,’ I argued petulantly, my foot stamping on an obliging piece of pavement in solidarity with my outburst – that of a spoiled child who wasn’t getting his own way.

Odd, this performance, since there was nobody around to impress with my tantrum; I was the sole occupant of the footpath while gazing longingly at the desired object in the window of the hi-fi shop next door to the supermarket whither I was bound to purchase some groceries. I was alone, as I say, yet I still, for some reason, spoke petulantly. What was even more odd about this incident is the indisputable fact that I am no longer a spoiled child, rather a mature (well, in theory) adult with a teenage family of my own. Yes very odd, until you take account of the fact that I was facing stiff opposition in the person (or is it half person? Oh, no need to get technical I suppose) of Fred ...

Later:

At last, I reflected, I had realised my dream of distraction-free, privatised listening. But the consummate happiness, transcending the ineffable joy of acquiring a set of state-of-the-art, stereo headphones, was produced by the astonishing fact that there hadn’t even been the slightest murmur of censure, warning or condemnation from Fred. Obviously I had silenced him with my devastating logic.

‘There is nothing,’ I murmured to myself, ‘like a bit of well-timed rationalisation to vanquish an overbearing conscience,’ and I was about to add ‘Up yours!’ for good measure, when Fred smirked and pointed out, as a matter of minor interest, that I had just spent all the grocery money!

(From ‘Cheap At The Price’, story in *Life With Fred*)

566 **Circumstances alter perceptions**

Those who, in health, couldn’t care less will, in infirmity, turn to those who care more.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

567 **One-sided love affairs**

One-sided love affairs are to be avoided at all costs. The trouble is that we don't realise they have become one-sided until we are so deeply immersed in a blind, passionate devotion that it is too late to extricate ourselves.

The one exception to this rule is that, when my passionate love for God falls foul of the vagaries of the human condition, and I feel like telling him what to do with himself in no uncertain manner (and sometimes do), I can *always* rely on him to remain faithful and steadfast in his love for me. But, while it is the case that I always can rely on him, it is not the case that I always do, especially when I feel abandoned. So, in those anguished times, he has to do all the loving. Not alone do I not avoid that kind of one-sided love affair, I need it to sustain me more than air, water or food.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

568 **Jasmine to the rescue**

I had nearly reached the changing area, post swim, when I stopped in surprise.

'Hello, Jasmine, what are you doing here? Delighted to see you of course, but I wasn't expecting you.'

'Good morning, dear Ken. I've just saved you from having your car keys pinched.'

'What?'

'I was flying hither and thither and decided to drop in and see you swim. You've spoken glowingly about the experience on a number of occasions. Anyway, I was just in time to spot a young fellow bent over your trousers and he had your keys in his hand.'

'Young thug! How did you stop him?'

'See the woodpecker up on that pole?'

'Yes.'

'I got him to peck the guy's ass with considerable vigour. That got his attention all right. He dropped the keys like a hot potato and ran off clutching his rear end.'

(From 'In The Swim', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

569 **Why are we here?**

I have often pondered this question, and eventually came up with an answer that satisfies *me*: we are here to be in the service of Love. What does that mean? So much of our lives and the lives of those we have read about, even many of the saints, seems to be concerned with the execution of duty. We have a duty to our spouses, children, employers, friends, the society in which we live and so on. But often ‘duty’ brings with it a sense of burden, often onerous. I do this, that or the other ‘because it is my duty’.

When, however, we come into a profound personal experience of the infinite, steadfast, unconditional love of God, any service we give is no longer born of duty, but of a heartfelt, often intuitive, response to that love. Therefore we are no longer carrying the burden of duty; rather we are in the service of Love. The contemporary Hindu mystic, Amma, when asked how she sometimes reaches out to people for eighteen hours or more unbroken, said, ‘Where there is love, there is no effort.’

And, as I have said elsewhere, ultimately the purpose of human life is to experience our oneness with God – with Love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

570 **The problems of a cat owner**

Our cat is snow-white. In colour not nature I hasten to add, as will quickly become evident. At the appropriate age he was thoroughly vetted if you know what I mean, yet he continues to defend his manhood, that is to say cathood – male variety – as if it had never been subjected to the scalpel. The trouble is that, all too frequently, he is to be found locked in mortal combat, even in broad daylight, with a coal-black, feline foe of uncertain origin and no fixed abode, whereas his predecessors in the family ménage were quite happy to perch high up on the shed and watch, with total disdain, the rest of the neighbourhood cat population battling it out below.

(From ‘Puddy Tat’, story in *In My Write Mind*)

571 **Prayer of petition**

For me, the prayer of petition (asking God for what I need/want for myself or for others) has often been results-based; that is, my estimate of the value of the prayer of petition is relative to whether – or to what degree – *I perceive* it to have been answered. Mostly I have not seen direct answers, so have concluded that I have little or no trust in this type of prayer.

Where I have been going astray is to look, in the short term, for a specific answer to a specific request. As an example, for the last three months or so, I have a headache that just won't go away, and all prayer to have it removed has been 'ignored'. Yet, when I look at the broader canvas, I can see that many, many prayers have been answered in my life but usually not according to *my* way or time frame. God sees beyond the specific request of the moment to what I really need in the long term.

The three best examples of this in my life are [I give just one here]: I prayed and prayed to God to save the family business in the early 1970s. The result? It went into liquidation and we lost everything! And why? So that he could provide me with the career I had always wanted and a livelihood to meet the needs of my family in the long term ... But I couldn't possibly see that this would be the outcome when I first prayed ...

So, I ask for what *I think* I need/want, but the God of infinite, steadfast, unconditional love always provides me with what I *really* need/want! ...

It is precisely the same when I pray for others. I pray for specifics in their lives, and when they don't get them, I conclude my prayer is worthless or hasn't been heard. Once again, God knows what they really need. Thus, now, when I pray for others, I almost always say simply, 'Touch them where they most need touching.' Exceptions would be, for example, if one of my adult children is going for a new job. I *never* pray that they will get it, but I do ask that they will get it *only* if it is right for them.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

572 **Saying no**

I admire your increasing ability to say ‘No’ to people. I have got much better at that too – and without any guilt which is a great blessing. There are a number of people I help, and this can be quite demanding. But I have made it clear to them that if they contact me at any time and the well has run dry, I will tell them that I cannot be available to them on that day – and they accept that.

(From a letter, July 2007)

573 **Abandonment**

It is a widespread belief – and a creed to which I subscribed for many decades – that we can be abandoned in one way or another. Of course, it is true that we can be abandoned by others on whom we rely, perhaps the most pitiful being when a child is abandoned by a parent. However, although it has taken me a long time, I have finally come to the conclusion that the only ones who are capable of truly abandoning us are ourselves. When we are abandoned by others, the abandonment is relative, not absolute, and we can, with help if necessary, recover from it. Ultimately, I am the only one who can *completely* abandon me; this is almost always an unconscious process, and it takes insight and courage to perceive, acknowledge and come to accept the fact. Then, once again perhaps with help, we can pursue the path toward reclaiming our own true identity, which comes from within ourselves, not from others.

This is evident in life as a whole, but particularly so in the spiritual realm, that is in my relationship with God. When I draw a conclusion that I have been abandoned by him, usually because I am in what feels like unbearable pain and don’t understand his way (which often means that he is not doing it my way!), note that it is I who am drawing this conclusion on the basis of *circumstantial* evidence. Therefore, when I adopt such an unverifiable – or, more appropriately, an utterly false – conclusion as incontrovertible truth, it is tantamount to abandonment of myself. To put it otherwise: I am listening to

a self-generated lie. I am accepting an illusion as truth. This, as before, is often an unconscious process and may well be based on feelings of abandonment in my human experience, but I am listening to a lie nevertheless. Not any more.

A quantum turning point came for me in mid-July 2000, when – the pinnacle of a process of renewal, so to speak – the God of my understanding infused my life with Love beyond the dreams of many lifetimes, and that presence has never left me in the intervening sixteen years. I haven't stopped being human, however. I can still feel abandoned at times, but this does not happen often, and it lasts only for a few seconds. That in itself is a miracle. One of the many fruits of not feeling abandoned any more is that, in like manner, I rarely feel lonely.

And all this came as a sublime, unconditional gift. My only input was to yearn for it from the core of my being.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

574 **The writer's curse**

What new to write, what potent phrase,
What thought not long since penned?
What cogent verse, what language terse
Can tedium now transcend?
I've said it once, and twice and thrice,
The frequency's deplorable;
The themes are oft oblique or dull,
Too plain or unexplorable.
I've scribbled on through thick and thin,
Reality ignoring;
The truth is this (though hard to bear):
I'm becoming stale and boring.
But though I've said it all before,
For better or for worse,
I'll have to say it all again,
For that's the writer's curse!

(‘Condemned’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

575 **A chance encounter?**

There was a man waiting at the bus stop. He was about fifty years of age with greying hair, and when he saw Barbara approaching, he smiled and bid her the time of day.

‘Good afternoon; lovely day!’

‘Good afternoon! Yes, it certainly is. Do you know how long the next bus will be?’

‘About five minutes. All depending on the traffic of course. How shall we pass the time?’ His speech, while distinctly English-speaking, did not betray any particular region by an identifiable accent, and he was soft-spoken.

In theory, Barbara should have regarded this perfect stranger as being rather forward, but she experienced the oddest sensation that the question was quite natural, even to be expected.

‘What do you suggest?’ she asked.

‘Well, I happened to notice you in the park a few minutes ago. You were admiring the roses. Do you like roses?’

‘Yes,’ said Barbara, ‘I love them. I thought the dark pink ones were just beautiful.’

‘So did I. You know the symbolic meaning of dark pink roses, do you not?’

‘No, actually.’

‘Thankfulness. Be thankful for your gift of insight and follow it implicitly; it will never let you down.’

Barbara gasped. ‘How did you know about my ...?’

‘Forgive me, I have to dash. I am not catching the bus; I was just waiting to meet you.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

576 **Faith is vital**

Without a faith based on infinite, steadfast, unconditional love, a faith broad and all-inclusive enough to embrace everybody, and a faith that has repeatedly stood up under heavy fire, I would never have survived. And that kind of faith is a gift.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

577 **Telephone therapy**

I use the telephone with people I trust, and they ring me when they are in trouble. We may not even talk about problems, may even just have a joke or two, but I always feel better having talked to somebody who understands. Just make the connection.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

578 **Frailty, thy name is woman**

‘I hate to complain, and I don’t wish to appear unduly touchy, but I really don’t like the title,’ said Lucille. ‘In the first place, it’s unnecessarily demeaning to womankind, and in the second place, it’s just not true.’

‘I say, Lucille, I’m awfully sorry; I didn’t mean to be insulting. Indeed my motives were as pure as the driven snow. I was going to ask you about the Great Bard, and I wanted a quotation to open the proceedings. The excerpt at the top of the page just happened to be the one that my eye first beheld when I opened my book of quotations at random. I’ll change it if you like.’

‘No, no; it’s all right. I have great respect for Shakespeare, even though I’m not wild about that particular quotation. I suppose we have to allow the great man his errors of judgement; he was but human.’

(From ‘Frailty, The Name Is Woman’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

579 **What is heresy?**

In my perception, ‘heresy’ is a word used by the major religions ... who believe they have a stranglehold on the truth

It occurs to me that this emotive word signifies: Anything I believe in the religious/spiritual realm that you, claiming some superior, unassailable or infallible authority, think is wrong.

Fortunately for me, they no longer burn heretics at the stake!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

580 **Deterrent**

'I'm a failure,' I wailed dementedly ... 'I think I'll end it all and throw myself into the docks.'

'Er ... I wouldn't,' said Fred, interrupting my dismal, melancholic monologue.

'Why not?' I pouted, wallowing in gloomily satisfying self-pity, but exasperated by his unwelcome interference. You will have noticed, by the way, a consummate example of my brilliant questioning technique. There is nothing like a well-timed 'Why not?' to throw the opposition into total disarray, and it was important, in this instance, to stop him in his tracks since my melancholic mind regarding the docks project was irrevocably made up.

'Because,' he countered, not even needing to pause for thought, 'the outside temperature right now is minus three degrees Celsius and the water is too fucking cold.'

I shivered at the thought

'What's more, you wouldn't do it anyway. Today is just one of those rotten days that chuck themselves at us now and again, when you've somehow got your portion of our mental knickers in a disconcerting twist, and it will pass before long.'

'Hmm! ... Perhaps you're right,' I admitted reluctantly.

(From 'Timely Intervention', story in *Life With Fred*)

581 **Examination of conscience**

Conscience, so we have been taught, is the inner voice that, at best, tells us where we have gone wrong and, at worst, informs us that we are a heap of shit ...

See? We have been taught to take stock of everything that is bad about ourselves. However, in the normal run of things, most stockrooms contain largely good merchandise. I used to wonder what it would be like to have my conscience say on a regular basis something like: 'I think you are a good man, wonderful and talented, and I love you!'

Now I know what it's like! As a matter of fact my conscience has got very good at it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

582 **Graphic description of an organisation**

‘Oh! You mean *there*?’

‘Yes.’

‘There where the corporate sense of direction is akin to that of a cross-eyed camel walking backwards in a snow storm?’

‘Yes.’

‘... Where ... the principal management tool is a large bucket of whitewash, and the only thing they know about motivation is that it’s a word beginning with “m”?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where manipulation has about as much to do with physiotherapy as curried chips have to do with achieving an orgasm?’

‘Yes.’

‘There where even the woodlice die for want of recognition, and the long-term inmates frequently petition the authorities to be released early for good behaviour?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where, in short, the only realistic solution is a fleet of bulldozers and a generous supply of quicklime.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Lucille.

(From ‘Message Received’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

583 **Reality and illusion**

I have often written, particularly in my poems, about this world being illusory and spiritual reality being the only reality there is. This could give the impression that I have lost my marbles and am floating around with my head in some kind of pink cloud of make-believe, totally out of touch with the ‘real’ world. Sad really! I mean, have I never had toothache? That’s real, isn’t it? My wife and children are real, aren’t they? The comfort I get from a cup of tea is real, surely? The computer I am sitting at is real, isn’t it? And so it goes on.

Time for some serious clarification, I perceive!

(From ‘Reality And Illusion’, essay in
Reality And Illusion & Other Essays)

584 **God's ways are not our ways**

I suppose, you are probably on the point of saying, my dearest Lucille, that I am being rather short-sighted in this crucial matter. Doubtless you are about to point out that God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform, and that the fact that he seems silent for such a long time is not evidence of a lack of caring and love. Rather, you suggest, must he restrain his own compassionate desire to have a warm and close relationship with me just now, in order that I may learn from the many human circumstances of my life – which he has painstakingly arranged in minute detail – so that I might grow and mature into oneness with him later. Hmm! Now there's a thought ...

'You will, I am sure, also be quick to emphasise that the pain of separation, even the excruciating and mind-blowing anguish of the recurring suspicion that he doesn't exist at all will, in the fullness of time, render all the sweeter the ineffable joy of eternal union with him and all his people. No doubt you will highlight the timelessness of eternal life and the fact that all former experiences – particularly painful ones – will pass away and be as nothing in the new scheme of things. When the sun breaks forth and the gentlest zephyrs caress our cheeks, we quickly forget the raging storm, as it were.'

(From 'Now, That's Inspiration', story in *Life With Lucille*)

585 **Perhaps everybody doubts sometimes**

'Fred, this is very difficult and painful for me to say: I would dearly wish to be able to profess that the chequered history of our journey through life, and the endless searches for meaning had at last borne fruit, but the truth of the matter is that, weighing the evidence, and taking all things into consideration, there is no God.'

'Perhaps, perhaps not; I couldn't really say,' came the response.

I was aghast. 'But you're supposed to disagree vehemently and reassure me that there unquestionably is.'

(From 'All Is Not Lost', Story in *Life With Fred*)

586 **Plato's view of women**

Delightful creatures, women;
Said, I have to say,
In a neutral sort of way
Born of careful observation
From a safe, objective distance.
Fellow beings on the planet
Whose souls may blend with mine
In a philosophical manner,
But I remain aloof
From all sensual liaisons
As an apt and concrete proof
That I am e'er Platonic,
And most happily detached
From every scheme they've ever hatched
To attach me willy-nilly
With their sly and feminine wiles
Which provoke my trenchant comment
Spurred by chauvinistic freedom
(For which no base apology)
When I comprehend their antics,
Their coy and cunning tactics
Which I steadfastly resist ...
Yet here must I desist
From a stance most condescending,
A philosophy unbending,
For honesty will out
And the truth will have its way:
 Scarce leave me for a twinkling,
 No more than just a moment,
 With that rare and seldom human –
 A warm and gentle, elemental,
 Non-judgemental woman –
 And all my thought is come to nought,
 And I am a lost cause.

Delightful creatures, women;
But mark their awesome power
And keep them at arm's length!

(‘Plato’s Confession’, poem
in *Grin And Bear It!*)

587 **Beware the racing mind**

I was about to remonstrate with the Muse of Muses because a racing mind sounded like one of those socially unacceptable diseases that one doesn't mention in polite company, but she is usually remarkably accurate in her diagnosis of my various predicaments, so I reflected for a moment.

'Hmm! The racing mind! Now that you mention it, only yesterday I was driving past the house of a friend who, sadly, had lost his wife to cancer a few weeks previously, when I became aware of the following stream of consciousness: heartfelt compassion for the grieving friend, reflections on the eternal happiness now being enjoyed by his beloved wife, the conclusion that spiritual values are the only enduring ones, the volatile situation in the Middle East, a longing for my childhood teddy bear, inappropriate thoughts about an inaccessible woman, guilt over the inappropriate thoughts about the inaccessible woman, a cup of tea and a jam doughnut would just about fill the bill, I must ask the doctor about haemorrhoids on my next visit, the controversy regarding re-siting the city dump, I forgot to floss my teeth last night, I must rethink my approach to my work, what colour to paint the kitchen, wondering who came up with the idea of flavoured condoms, I need to get a potion of some kind for my headache, and a passing cocker spaniel reminded me of the one that we had which never got over its adolescent acne ...'

'Er ... gracious me, what an astonishing variety of thoughts! How long did it take for them to pass through your mind – twenty minutes?'

'Lucille, I'm not kidding; it took not one jiffy longer than twenty seconds. How I know is that's how long it takes me to get from the friend's house to the traffic lights and they were just turning red when I spotted the spaniel.

'Whew!' gasped Lucille. 'Twenty seconds? You've got it really bad!'

(From 'A Spot Of Psychology', story in *Life With Lucille*)

588 **Masterful, that's me**

I had had a long and tiring day, tending to the needs of others, pouring oil on troubled waters, sorting out insoluble problems at my place of employment, and generally administering balm to a troubled world.

'I'll call a taxi,' I said with a combined yawn and stretch. 'I'm much too tired to walk.'

'And I would much prefer to walk,' returned Fred. 'We've been stuck inside all day, and the air would do us good.'

I stood firm: 'Absolutely out of the question. We go by taxi.' When I make up my mind about something, not even a herd of wild stallions can make me change it. Masterful, that's me.

'Oh, go on!'

'No. Fred!'

'Ple-e-e-ase,' he said entreatingly.

'Oh well, all right then, but it's only just over half a mile; not much of a walk.'

(From 'Root Cause', story in *Life With Fred*)

589 **Developing self-esteem**

Developing self-esteem is not about acquiring qualities we do not now have; it means being healed of the 'temporary blindness' that prevents us from seeing the qualities we already possess. Ultimately, self-esteem is about seeing ourselves as God sees us. And God sees us as perfect in his eyes, a unique and beautiful individual, formed for love with him.

The 'blindness' is caused by seeing ourselves as we think the world sees us and constantly striving to mould ourselves to other people's perceptions. This is not to deny that we have habits and attitudes that need changing, that we often have to struggle to overcome the effects of our earlier conditioning; we do; that is part of the healing process, but the essential ingredients for a healthy sense of self-esteem have been ours from the very moment we were conceived in the mind and heart of God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

590 **Propriety**

One of the most important distinguishing characteristics of a balanced and civilised society is a sense of propriety, by which I mean that the members of the society think, talk and act in a way that is appropriate, dignified and respectful, and based on some generally accepted moral code. One of the yardsticks of the degree to which propriety exists in a particular society is the way in which the mass communications media behave. There are of course many notable exceptions, but, from my vantage point, the vast majority of the media have very little sense of propriety. Their moral code would seem to be: anything goes so long as it makes money. A bit extreme? Just walk into any newsagents and even a cursory glance at the array of print items on display will tend to confirm rather than contradict what I have said; and in recent years, the internet has added a whole new dimension to this dismal scenario. More worrying, as I have observed elsewhere,* is the thought that we get the media we deserve, so that this dearth of propriety comes from the ground up. Oh, dear!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See 'Daily Bread' in *In My Write Mind*.

591 **Slow down and listen to the inner voice**

Thank you so much for sharing with me in your latest letter about your busy life and how you finally let yourself be led by your intuition. This was very comforting. I know that when I do precisely that, all is well. But, for some perverse reason, I will sometimes busy myself to such a degree that even if my intuition shouts, I can't (or won't) hear it. And this is a very timely message for me to hear from you. There is a lot going on at the moment – mostly in my head (various issues) – and my intuition is telling me to sit quietly with it and let higher wisdom direct me. It is nearly 9pm and I am going to send this email to you, then resist the temptation to tackle my fifty 'vital' projects all in one go, and go and sit quietly in my lounge and reflect in front of the fire.

(From a letter, October 2005)

592 **No April fool for Jasmine**

‘Hold on! What date is it?’

‘April 1st.’

I scanned the small print at the foot of the article. ‘Hell’s bells, Jasmine! This article is an April fool.’

‘April fool? What’s an April fool?’

I explained the curious tradition as best I could.

‘You mean that blurb was some feather-brained journalist’s idea of a joke?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Sick!’

(From ‘Mission Improbable’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

593 **A Jane Austen fan**

I spent a night in Bath later in the week, and went to ‘An evening with Jane Austen’ in the open air at the Holburne Museum. A few members of the Stopwatch Theatre Company gave a presentation based on Jane’s letters and excerpts from all the novels. It was very well done and a great evening’s entertainment – and they had an audience of only twenty or so on the evening I was there. People don’t know what they’re missing.

(From a letter, July 1997)

594 **A writer matures**

Most fledgling writers will identify with the perceived need to have their work validated by outside sources – friends, teachers, workshop leaders, critics of one sort or another and, if publication is the objective, the reading public. Perhaps rare wordsmiths do exist who know from day one, line one, that the only validation of the work that counts is their own, but I have never come across any of them. In my case, the transition from needing outside approval to becoming honorary president and the entire (almost!) membership of my fan club has been a gradual process.

(From ‘The Semi-Detached Writer’, essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

595 **The (symbolic) meaning of the crucifixion**

Seen in isolation, the crucifixion was a tragic defeat, a meaningless sacrifice, a pitiful waste of a life that could have done so much more good. But the whole point of the crucifixion was the resurrection – Jesus conquering death. When I see a crucifix I see not the crucifixion but the resurrection. The cross, then, is a sign of victory, not defeat.

On a more whimsical note, it occurs to me that the reason that a cross has long been the symbol of Christianity, is that an early graphic artist suggested to the disciples' design committee that it would be very difficult to come up with a simple but convincing logo representing the resurrection. Pity.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

596 **Feminine virtue – and lucky me**

'There is only one thing, when all is said and done, that I look for in a woman – and the discouraging thing is that one so seldom ...'

'Creativity, patience, efficiency, practicality? No, I've got it: intelligence. You always appreciate intelligence; and of course it's no harm at all if they are a little decorative into the bargain. That's it in a nutshell, isn't it?'

'No Fred, in a nutshell or outside it, that is decidedly not it. And you're bloody well interrupting again. All things considered, the quality I most admire in a woman but, as I was about to say, so rarely find, is gentleness.'

'Lucky you, then!' said Fred.

'Huh?'

'Lucky you to have found one of the rare ones in your good lady wife.'

'You can certainly say that again!' I responded with enthusiasm.

'Lucky you to have found one of the rare ones in your good lady wife.'

'Figure of speech, Fred; figure of speech!'

I sighed. Fred can be a bit slow at times.

(From 'Figure of Speech', story in *Life With Fred*)

597 **Those butter substitutes**

Some scholars declare that butter is lethal,
While others say surfeits of marge can be fatal,
And this is a blend of the two, for God's sake –
Twice the potential to shake my good health.
In future, I'll opt for one or the other,
And since I've a strong predilection for butter,
That's what I'll put on my bread.
That way, at least, I'll end up half healthy ...
Or half dead!

(From 'Half Measures', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

598 **I've let go of analysis**

In times past, I used to analyse things too much for my own good – or so it seemed. On one occasion I wrote: 'I have microscopes where my eyes ought to be!' Analysis, in this context, meant looking for intellectual explanations for many things, a good number of which would simply not yield any intellectual explanation, for they were things of the spirit. As I have written elsewhere, *We were given a finite human intellect to deal with finite human situations. When we attempt to press it into service to decipher the spiritual, we walk straight into a brick wall ...*

Indeed, in the spiritual realm, the human intellect can be a serious liability. For me, it is the heart and spirit that interpret spirituality, and they operate largely in a dimension beyond finite language. Therefore, I rely almost exclusively on 'intuition' which is itself a totally inadequate word to describe the actual process, which comes from God and, therefore, in large measure defies description ...

In recent years, this penchant for analysis has, most thankfully given way to a process of reflection, in which I place the relevant topic before God and as, patiently as possible, await his 'intuitive nudges', his insights, which come from a realm light years beyond the intellect, and which often blow my mind away. More often the reflections come without any initiation from me or effort on my part.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

599 **Fred in philosophical mode**

For once, like approaching rain clouds, I could see it coming, so I had my script prepared and at the ready. My boy scout training was coming into its own.

‘I was just thinking ...’ commenced Fred.

‘Delighted to hear it, old thing. Makes a pleasant change from your customary empty-headed *modus operandi*,’ I interjected, grabbing the forecasted opportunity to get him before he got me.

‘As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted by the unwarranted slur,’ he continued, determined not to be intimidated by the insult, ‘I was just thinking – pretty avidly thinking, mind you – more or less along the following lines: I have been reviewing the frightful quandaries that you and I seem to have a habit of getting ourselves into, virtually on a daily basis, and have come to the only conclusion that any half-brain (which, as I hope you will readily admit, is what I am) can come to, namely and to be specific, that life, such as it is, is much too serious to be taken seriously. And given that humour is our best friend, and excessive cerebral intensity our worst enemy, we ought to lighten up a good deal.’

I gaped at him, but then stopped because it’s quite difficult to talk while gaping. Eventually, however, I ceased gaping, and spoke.

‘It’s quite extraordinary, you know,’ I said in a conciliatory and apologetic tone, ‘but you amaze me, Fred. I learn something new about your character every single day of my life. And do you know what? There is more than just a touch of the sublime philosopher about you.’

‘Yes,’ he murmured, drinking in the heady wine of a seldom compliment, ‘I have my moments!’

(‘The Thinker’, story in *Life With Fred*)

600 **The essential me**

Yet is there an immutable essence within me
That comes from a greater presence beyond me ...

(From ‘Shifting Sands’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

601 **Lucille in uncharacteristic mood**

“‘Thou should’st not carp and cavil so, Nor castigate, nor thus complain ...’”

‘I’m neither carping nor cavilling,’ came a voice, ill-concealing its annoyance.

‘Yes, Lucille, I know you’re not. You see ...’

‘And are you proposing to make me redundant? You launched into that two line whatever-it-was without so much as consulting me on a single word.’

‘No, my sweet, the fact is ...’

‘A fine how d’you do. I inspire hundreds of wonderful pieces for you, then you toddle off without let or hindrance and indulge in a bit of clandestine composition. There’s gratitude for you.’

‘Hang on a moment, Lucille ...’

‘Anyway, I don’t think much of your feeble DIY efforts. Carping and cavilling indeed! Not to mention castigating and complaining! The alliteration is way over the top and discordant into the bargain. Who ever heard of such rubbish? I mean to say, if you had had the courtesy and the common sense to give me even two seconds, I could have come up with something far better than that half-baked nonse—’

‘LUCILLE,’ I shouted. ‘If you would just let me get a word in edgeways for goodness’ sake, you’d find out that you’ve got it all wrong. Firstly, contrary to your opening remarks, you *are* carping and cavilling to a significant degree. Secondly, I didn’t write those lines. I was merely endeavouring to recall, out loud, the words of an obscure poem which I was required, by an eccentric English teacher, to learn off by heart as a youth.’

‘Oh, I see,’ said Lucille, embarrassed and crestfallen. ‘Oh dear! I am sorry. It’s not like me to go on like that is it?’

‘No, my precious Muse, it isn’t. You rather took me by surprise.’

(From ‘Enough Is Enough’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

602 **Knowing God?**

I have often heard it said by theologians and others that it is not possible to know God. I mean this in no censorious vein for they, sadly, speak of and attempt to justify only that which they cannot experience, but to make such an assertion is akin to the members of a remote tribe, on hearing ‘fantastic’ tales of the western world, saying that there could never be such a thing as electricity ...

Julian of Norwich said:

It is easier for us to get to know God than to know our own soul ... God is nearer to us than our soul, for He is the ground in which it stands ... so if we want to know our own soul, and enjoy its fellowship, it is necessary to seek it in our Lord God.

I grieve that such knowledge seems so little in evidence in the world in which I live, that so many people struggle with the impoverished doctrine of blind faith.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

603 **Condescension?**

And I am under no illusion but that critics could easily pick holes in this present piece, writing it off, perhaps, as ill-conceived, implausible, under-researched, repetitious, or largely as the product of an over-stimulated imagination. Do I have anything to say to them? Only what I have said already: their loss, their immense loss. In case that sounds condescending, let me offer an alternative way of putting it: I am deeply saddened on their account that these people and millions of others are, perhaps unknowingly, greatly impoverished because they are either unwilling or unable to access the priceless treasures which are available to them and which are their birthright. I long for them all to discover the ineffable and sublime wonder of the truth. And if that’s condescension, I need a new dictionary. Regrettably, a well-worn cliché serves here: there are none so blind as those who do not want to see.

(From ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’,
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

604 **Why suffering?**

‘Our Beautiful One takes no joy in your suffering; it is necessary to bring you to where you need to be.’

(From ‘Appendix I’, *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

605 **Good motivation for a collection of poems**

Today, I had to undergo hospital tests requiring a general anaesthetic ... I was still drowsy after a little sleep and just decided to do something physically undemanding, lightweight and enjoyable for the rest of the day. So I selected twelve poems from my existing collections which I felt would be appropriate for a slim volume that would afford me the pleasure of designing a new cover. Much as I would like to claim a more aesthetically uplifting motivation, that is the sole reason for the production of *Three Four Five* ...

Actually, now that I reflect upon it, that is utter nonsense! I had the same tests fourteen years ago when my children were young, and I prayed that I would be left here until they were adults and self-sufficient. That wish was granted to me, so I realised that anything now would be a bonus. When I was told that all was well today, I was deeply moved. So this little book is in gratitude for the gift of life, and especially for the way in which My God nurtures me through the wonders of Nature. I am equally grateful for the fact that, before the tests, I was able to express the willingness to accept the outcome, whatever it might be.

(From the Introduction to *Three Four Five*)

606 **No retirement**

Why they call it ‘retirement’ I cannot surmise.

‘Refreshment’ would be more appropriate,

Or perhaps even ‘renaissance’,

For there’s so much I want to be doing

And I surely will need ten lifetimes

To achieve the desires of my heart. ...

(From ‘Lupins’, poem in *Three Four Five*)

607 **Judgement day?**

Is there going to be a last day when God will sit in judgement on all of us, and some will go up and some will go down?

Look at it this way: if God is going to judge us, as scriptures say he will, then presumably he will judge us according to various criteria which he has drawn up. And if we fail, he may say something like: 'You have not met my conditions, therefore you may not have eternal happiness.' Now get this: the God of *unconditional* love will condemn us because we have not met his *conditions* ...

Judgement day? I think not.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

608 **The gutter press**

'What's the likelihood that one of your sisters inspires the so-called journalists of the gutter press?'

'Hold on! That's a pretty rough allegation, and somewhat lacking in sensitivity, if you don't mind my saying so. My sisters are as pure as the driven snow.'

'Take it easy, Lucille; it's only a question, not an allegation, and you know what I mean. Those blood-sucking parasites daily destroy lives entire, and if one of your sisters is responsible for putting unprincipled and licentious notions into their heads, she ought to have her rear end kicked from the top of Mount Olympus to the bottom.'

'I couldn't agree more,' said Lucille. Despite being taken aback by my directness, she couldn't but admit the validity of what I was saying.

'Then I trust, my shining light of integrity, that you will petition your esteemed father to ensure that investigations are initiated, and justice done.'

'No need.'

'Huh?'

'Though undeniably in the inspiration business, none of my sisters would ever perpetrate such a monstrous outrage. The Muses' Code of Practice strictly forbids that sort of thing.'

‘Yes, but what if one of them, having tired of the straight and narrow, is at it on the side – just for kicks?’

‘Oh, ye gods,’ cried Lucille, dismayed. ‘Perish the thought; that possibility hadn’t crossed my mind.’

‘I mean,’ I went on, pressing my point, ‘these wolves in sheep’s clothing, who ruthlessly peddle rampant scandal and unbridled porn, must be getting their raw material from somewhere, and what’s more –. Lucille?’ She was nowhere to be seen, and it was some time before she reappeared.

‘So you’re back. You scurried off on me in mid-sentence, you know ...’

‘Yes – *puff!* – sorry and all that, but the suspicions you voiced gave me such a shock that – *when!* – I just had to go and investigate post-haste and on the double.’

‘Crumbs, Lucille, slow down; take it easy old thing. You’re quite out of breath.’

‘So would you be – *gasp!* – if you’d just kicked your sister’s rear end from the top of Mount Olympus to the bottom.’

(‘Rude Awakening’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

609 **Difference between humans and other species**

For me then, the signal difference between humans and all other species is that humans, sooner or later, and manifested in various ways, yearn for ‘something’ beyond themselves. As Julian of Norwich put it:

And never can we stop desiring and longing until he is ours in the fullness of bliss.

and

Because he yearns for us, we in turn ache for him, and no one comes to bliss without such an ache.

I would take some convincing that even the most advanced of the primates sit meditating on trees in the jungle, wondering if there is a Great Ape in the Sky, which thought brings me to remark that Darwin’s Theory of Evolution is still precisely that – a theory. It is almost always presented in the media, however, as given and accepted wisdom.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

610 **The truth is always best**

‘It has occurred to me more than once in the past number of weeks, Fred, that what we need is a damn good holiday.’

Fred’s expression of delight was immediate and effervescent: ‘The nail on its proverbial head is precisely what you have just hit, said nail being exactly what the jolly old doctor ordered. In short, fellow potential tourist, a corking good idea – one of the ripest you have produced, in fact. Where shall we go? Neither of us is particularly fond of skin cancer, so a sunshine destination is out. How about the Austrian mountains or even merrie olde Englande?’

It distressed me greatly to have to pour cold water on his enthusiasm, but it had to be done, for the truth, however painful, is always best in the end.

‘No, no, my long-time companion, you’ve got it all wrong; the fact of the matter is that I need a holiday away from you ... You have to admit that, while we are irrevocably attached to each other, we do get on each other’s nerves now and again, and a break from this incessant togetherness would be a very healthy and therapeutic thing all round ...’

‘Forgive me if I wax pragmatic: we have a serious strategic problem, viz. how do we split up for the duration of the vacation?’

‘Gosh Fred,’ I said, dismayed, crestfallen, possibly even aghast. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. Anything to suggest?’

‘For once, loath though I am to admit it, short of praying earnestly for the gift of bilocation, nothing of value comes to mind ... I rather fear, my dear old permanence, that we have little choice but to bow to the inevitable, and grin and bear it with fortitude, namely to accept that ...’

Miffed at seeing my dream shattered, I finished the sentence for him: ‘... we’re stuck with each other. Right?’

‘Quite. You took the words out of our mouth, and to quote your very own pearl of wisdom: *The truth, however painful, is always best in the end.* Now, where shall we go for that holiday?’

(From ‘No Respite’, story in *Life With Fred*)

611 **Dealing with a wicked goblin – an insoluble problem?**

‘It seems to me that we have to find a way to beat him at his own game.’

‘Yes, but how? I have tried everything I know.’

‘I’ll just do a quick search and we’ll see what we can find out ... Yes, here we are: *Goblins are highly intelligent and capable, but they have one major chink in their armour: they come out only at night or, at most, in very subdued light because they are afraid of bright sunlight.* There’s more, but that will do us for the moment.’

‘A fat lot of use that is,’ said the fairy, irritably. ‘He always comes around midnight. Perhaps you would tell me how you are going to persuade the sun to shine in the middle of the night.’

I had to admit she had a point. I reflected silently for a few moments, bringing all of my considerable brainpower to focus on the problem at hand, then answered, ‘Leave all this to me ... Now, I’ll have a lot of work to do here tomorrow, so why don’t you take the day off? Fly or magic yourself to some favourite spot and don’t come back until just before midnight.’

(From ‘Whose Tree?’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

612 **Encouraging a youthful writer**

I loved your two poems. You played with words and images very beautifully and at times forcefully – all of which creates pieces which attract and hold the reader’s attention. You have some very effective lines where one can almost hear the sound ... Then again, there are soft lines but just as effective ... You also state truisms with a delicate simplicity ...

You have a real gift, there is no doubt about that. I sincerely hope that you will continue to write. You will get great fulfilment from watching your work grow and mature as time goes by. Do experiment with various forms of writing, won’t you?

As one writer to another, I wish you many blessings with every word you write.

(From a letter, April 2013)

613 Validation versus affirmation

Much modern therapy focuses on the need to stop the ‘people-pleasing’ we do in order to obtain the validation,* the approval of others and learn to validate ourselves instead. For me, this internal validation comes from God.

Does this mean that genuine praise and compliments have no value, are even to be shunned lest they pull me back into my people-pleasing behaviour? No!

I have learned to differentiate between validation and affirmation.† When I seek validation from others, I measure myself by *their* estimation of my worth and (to use a phrase I dislike but which expresses it well) I give my power away. Affirmation on the other hand is a sincere acknowledgement by others of the gifts and talents they see in me which endorses the self-worth and the sense of identity that I have already drawn from within. Moreover, it is wholesome that I accept such compliments rather than indulge in self-effacement born of false modesty, for to deny the gift is to deny the giver.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Original meaning came from Latin *ualere* – to be strong, hence well; but it is interesting to note that it evolved through the German language into ‘to have power over’. Hence, in modern English to validate means to give worth or approval to another, but there is a very clear implication that the person doing the validating has power over the person seeking the validation.

† From the Latin *firmare* – to make firm, to confirm.

614 A potential controversy

‘Lucille,’ I commenced, ‘I fear that, historically, a great injustice has been done to men. Popular belief would have it that woman is the romantic of the species and man the inconsiderate clod who has to be prodded into displays of affection. As time goes by, however, it strikes me increasingly that the reverse is the truth ...’

‘Now, hold on a sec ...’

(From ‘Balancing Act’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

615 **Teddy bears**

I'm going out to buy myself a teddy bear (I have three already). And therefrom, as you can imagine, derives a very long story which I hope to share with you some time.



I didn't find the teddy bear I was looking for. Mine has to have just the right look on its face – a gentle, affectionate look. I'll keep looking until I find him; he's out there waiting for me somewhere – or she! Do soft toys have gender?



I had a great belly laugh at your response to my question about teddy bears having gender: 'Of course teddy bears have gender; how do you think there gets to be MORE teddy bears!' Terrific. Now why didn't I think of that?



Attached is a picture of the teddy bear I was looking for. I was in the supermarket and just happened to spot this blue one. My childhood teddy bear was blue. I don't recall ever seeing another blue bear since then; blue and white yes, but not entirely blue. So I made no attempt to resist buying her – yes, actually I think it's a female bear! As it turns out the day I bought her would have been my mother's birthday; she died when I was just fourteen.

(From four letters, October to December 2004)

616 **Albert Einstein**

Albert Einstein, from whom one might have expected a secular, intellectual, scientific approach, said: *There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle; the other as though everything is a miracle.* It is clear from his life and work that his was the way of miracles.

Albert Einstein also said: *The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious.* He was absolutely right.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

617 **Great expectations?**

Glad words my waiting heart oft hears
When home from work my spouse appears:
 ‘Come here my pet, my koochie-koo,
 Come here and let me cuddle you.
 I missed you so, your fetching eyes,
 Those tender ways I idolise.
 I’m always glad to find you here,
 Your hearty welcome brings good cheer,
 And so I brought a little gift
 To heal our early morning rift.
 Poor thing, you’ve drained the bitter cup,
 So this, I trust, will cheer you up –
 A beefy bone to lift the fog.’
I wish I was the bloody dog!

(‘Demotion’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

618 **Learning from Nature**

‘Look, my dear friend! A group of withered foxgloves, but in the middle, one blossom in full bloom. Now isn’t that amazing?’

‘Yes ... um, foxgloves. Some are withered but there is one in full bloom. So that often happens, right? Plants grow, then fade and others come up to replace them.’

‘True, David. But when do foxgloves blossom?’

‘Generally June to August. Around here, they are mostly gone by late July.’ David still had not grasped the significance of what Tomas was saying.

‘And what is the date today?’

‘November 4th ... Oh, my goodness! That’s impossible.’

Tomas’ familiar pattern was to remain silent for a while before finishing what he had to say. This occasion was no exception. He allowed just the correct amount of time to elapse for the import of what Nature was teaching to dawn on his young companion, then placed his hand on David’s shoulder. ‘Nothing, my dearest friend, is impossible.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

619 **The essence of a promise**

One other point worth making is this: many parents have their children christened (baptised) in accordance with tradition, then take the matter no further. In each christening ceremony, either the parents or the godparents make a promise that the child will be brought up in the faith in which the christening takes place. Even if we do not want to follow the tenets of that particular religion for any reason, I suggest that it is well within the spirit of the promise to show them an avenue to spirituality as they grow to maturity.

(From 'Higher Values For Our Children?', essay in
Beyond The Rainbow)

620 **Accepting compliments**

A compliment is a gift. When I refuse to accept a compliment that is sincerely given, or only respond to it half-heartedly, I am saying to the giver, 'I don't want your gift.'

(From 'Compliments And Self-Esteem', essay in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

621 **Lucille, what am I going to do?**

'I've always been far too sensitive for my own good, Lucille. In most situations, I react rather than respond. Almost anything throws me. Often I feel like an open wound, as if I had been born without any emotional insulation – barely touch me and I flinch.'

'Oh, I don't know; you seem to me to have developed more resilience and tolerance of late; more on an even keel, you might say.'

'Now there you go again, Lucille, masking the truth with trivial platitudes,' I burst out.

'Hmm, I see what you mean. This is serious.'

'Whaddya mean "serious"?' I almost shouted.

'Very serious!'

The penny dropped and I cooled down. 'Oh, Lucille, what in heaven's name am I going to do?'

(From 'Just Imagine', story in *Life With Lucille*)

622 **The question of evil in the world**

I believe that this exercise would be incomplete without addressing the question which has plagued humankind from the earliest times: given the evil, injustice, greed, cruelty, and ‘natural’ disasters on the planet, how could there be a loving, all-caring God? A related question: how is it that some people seem consumed with bitter anti-God sentiments on these grounds, whereas others appear to have a transcendent trust and serenity, regardless of what’s happening in the world? Are the serene ones blissfully self-deceived, or is there more going on than meets the eye?

I cannot aspire to answer age-old questions, but what I can endeavour to do is lift the fog sufficiently for some of my readers to see a way forward. I am offering six* reflections – and there is a common thread running through them – in the hope that at least one of them will prove helpful:

- ✧ A woman in the travail of giving birth, perhaps a particularly difficult confinement, may well cry out, ‘Why all this unbearable pain?’ Shortly after, she holds her newborn child in her arms and, a few weeks later, sees the first enchanting smile. The pain is soon forgotten in knowing the joy of a new life.

- ✧ I often liken my sojourn here to a journey across the desert. Not a place most people would go for choice. But here’s the thing: there is always an oasis, often just when I feel I cannot take one more step, and, in my passage, each one is more comforting, sometimes surprising, frequently joyful, than the last. And, ultimately, I will get to the sublimely beautiful pasture on the other side.

(From ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’,
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

* I give just two of them here.

623 Where possible let's not be cynical

I visited my son when he was living in Switzerland in 1996 (he, I hasten to add, is definitely not cynical) and we were sitting at an open-air café on a street in Bern on a fine summer's evening. A young woman carrying a basket passed by and placed a small teddy bear together with a note on the table in front of me and then moved on to other tables. The note explained that the girl was deaf and dumb and would be grateful for a donation. My son made a comment to the effect that 'Oh, they're always going around' (implying there was no need to give much if anything) which I countered with, 'Well, it may be common to you, but I've never seen this before.' I took a substantial bank note out of my wallet – more than the usual donation but scarcely a king's ransom. A few minutes later, the young woman, having completed her rounds, returned to our table to see if there was any harvest to be gathered in. She could have just pocketed the loot and scurried off not believing her luck. Instead she looked at the bank note which I had taken from the table and handed to her, observed me holding the teddy bear, then broke into the most beautiful smile, placed a second teddy bear in front of my son and disappeared into the crowd.

My donation was returned a hundredfold. No cynic me; no cynic she. Thank God for such lovely interludes ... The little teddy bear still (2016) resides on the desk in my study, ever reminding me how blessed I am.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

624 Emotions can be troublesome

When emotions get too hot to handle – ask for help. Don't let misplaced pride force you to bottle it up. Remember: 'No man is an island ...' A significant internal shift takes place when we admit to ourselves that we are up against a brick wall, and reach out for help.

(From Part 4 of *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*,
3rd edn)

625 **The deadly disease of denial**

Dark summons her to a death
That must not be;
Light beckons her to a life
She cannot see.
Blind both to ailment and to antidote,
She can contemplate
Neither the jealous vamp of death
That craves dominion
Nor the jaundiced view of life
That's her companion.
Adrift on an endless ocean of misery,
She is lost in uncharted waters
And fears there can be no rescue,
Yet still claims court and captaincy
O'er the foundering vessel she has become.
In confusion, she absorbs
The poisonous potion of self-pity
And the bitter pill of deep despair,
Convinced they are her firmest friends,
And turns unwittingly away
From the caring and compassion
Of those who've gone before
Who've made it safe to shore,
Shunning their every 'intrusion',
Refusing their proffered redemption,
Yet desperately needing salvation.
Behold a needless tragedy
That touches all who know her
And saddens those she loves:
She longs to live,
But will surely die.

(‘Cruel Paradox’, poem in *The Voice Of The Man-child*)

626 **At night on the mountain**

[The mountain] by night was a different place, although it retained the daytime sense of peace and safety. Some of the birds did not sleep, it seemed, and one could hear their calls intermittently during the night, but it was the way the breeze, at times a high wind, played with the rocks, the trees, the mountain ridges and the flapping tent canvas that fascinated David. During the daytime, when his vision and mind were occupied with all that was to be seen on the mountains and in the valleys, whatever messages were borne on the air often did not get heard. But, lying in the dark, alone in the dead of night, the voice of the wind held dominion and he was obliged to listen to it until sleep took him to its lair. The sounds varied with the intensity and direction of the wind, and he imagined them as voices speaking messages of love which invited him to decipher them. More than once, he became almost certain that he discerned a voice similar to the one he had heard in the wood as a six-year-old. 'David, you are not alone' would come softly and subtly on the currents of air and, now and then, even, 'I love you.' But he knew that the combination of memory, fantasy, solitude and the night-time sounds could enable him to make whatever he wished of the wind's vocabulary and that he had surely imagined it. At times, particularly around dawn, sheep came snuffling around his tent, but David loved the simplicity and innocence of these fluffy creatures and felt their presence a comfort. At daybreak, too, he would hear a distant cockerel announcing the arrival of the new day, and the cattle lowing in the foothills. On rising, he would bathe in the shallow part of the mountain lake and breakfast lightly before going back down the mountain, refreshed and fully alive.

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

627 **Feminism?**

Q. Am I in favour of feminism?

A. I am in favour of a society where there is no need for it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

628 **Nothing is impossible to God?**

It is often said by believers, and I have often said it, that nothing is impossible to God. It is something we tend to say particularly when we are facing an apparently intractable problem. The statement, however, is actually incorrect, and it doesn't take too much figuring out to see why: God, who is pure love, *cannot* do anything bad or evil. Absolutely impossible.

Not quite so obvious, but equally true is this: I am convinced that God has voluntarily rendered himself utterly incapable of not loving us. That is why his love knows no bounds, and he loves us exactly as he finds us, warts and all. We are a fortunate people, blessed beyond measure to have such a God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

629 **A crisis looms**

'I'm awfully sorry to wake you so early, but a crisis of frightful proportions looms, and I desperately need your help,' Lucille whispered in my ear.

'Oh,' – *yawn* – 'oh yes, Lucille. Good morning and all that. What! A dreadful crisis?' I said wiping the sleep from my eyes. 'What seems to be the problem?'

'It's my youngest sister, Urania (she'll be two thousand three hundred and forty next birthday). She's been working with this eccentric scientist for decades, and she's about to go off her nut. He's obstinate, unpredictable and cantankerous, and rarely listens to what she suggests, a trait which, she reckons, has cost him some path-breaking discoveries. She can't take any more, and is at the end of her tether.'

'Poor thing, she must be miserable. You had me worried for a minute, though; I thought there was something seriously amiss but, as I see it, the solution is quite straightforward. Tell her to talk to your good father, Zeus. He seems a pretty wise and concerned parent, and I am sure he will pull every conceivable divine string to ensure that his daughter doesn't have a nervous breakdown, and he does have the requisite power, you know.'

‘That’s the whole problem; she has already had a long chat with him, during which she made a very specific demand, and since she has always been the apple of Dad’s eye, he is almost certain to accede to her wishes.’

‘A bit of indulgence is no harm now and again, especially since she’s been through such a rough time. Let him give her what she wants. I don’t see any harm in that.’

Lucille burst into tears. ‘She wants to have me moved, and become your Muse. I’m at my wit’s end; I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to leave you. How could I? But I know Dad; he just won’t listen.’

(From ‘Role Reversal’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

630 **Fred’s at it again**

‘Fred, here’s an interesting question for you, a riddle if you’d prefer to call it that: what is it that takes over one’s entire being?’

‘Sex!’ said my psychic sidekick with no hint of hesitation.

‘Typical! Tsk! I suppose I ought to have expected something of the sort from you. Stuff and nonsense, Fred! That’s just stereotyped thinking. It’s all that steamy, titillating media hype that one finds in regrettable excess on the shelves of our newsagents and bookshops, not to mention television, the cinema and the internet. You should have more sense than to take any notice of it, especially with me as your mentor in such matters. And besides, although I know one swallow doesn’t make a summer nor one example a case, I have a friend who swears that he thinks about nothing else but playing football while he’s having sex – well, most of the time!’

‘And I suppose he thinks about nothing else but having sex while he’s playing football,’ retorted the internal menace, attempting to get his own back.

‘Stow it, Fred, will you No, what I had in mind was sneezing. In that fleeting moment of final explosion, it takes over completely; one has no choice but to give in to it absolutely.’

(From ‘Second Best’, story in *Life With Fred*)

631 **Don't anticipate in fear**

Dealing with an issue is never as bad as thinking about dealing with it. Once, as a teenager, I spent an entire year in considerable physical pain, dreading a visit to the dentist. Eventually I plucked up the courage to go; I needed one filling which took about ten minutes. I learned something from that! Anticipation is almost always worse than realisation.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

632 **Writing is a need**

When my Muse is off duty or goes on sabbatical, or I am not on an even keel for any reason, and as a result I am unable to write, it feels almost like cutting off my oxygen supply.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

633 **Paradoxical self-esteem**

I was having a serious discussion with a friend ... and we were sharing some thoughts on characteristics of our personalities that cause us problems, and found that we had a significant number of traits in common. Eventually I remarked, 'Well, all that said, I have a very strong and healthy sense of self-esteem.' He responded, 'I would question that.' Immediately I recalled what Anthony de Mello said in his book *Awareness*: 'We don't see others as they are but as we are.' I knew what my friend was saying was that the particular traits we had been discussing caused *him* to have poor self-esteem and he was unwittingly projecting his experience as being valid for me. I told him so as gently as I could and – to his credit – he more or less accepted it ...

The only time it falters is on the rare occasion when I am feeling extremely low and am, for instance, tempted to think of my writing as naïve, time-wasting and self-indulgent drivel worthy only of burning! I am, however, always enabled to banish that thought within seconds and the wholesome state of being returns to base.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

634 **The nurturing of Nature**

To walk the hills of Connemara,
Free as a bird in random flight,
To tread the paths of grey, brown and green,
Twixt boulder, bush and rippling stream;
To break the chains of yesteryear,
Beneath the sky's unfettered clouds;
To breathe the air of liberty,
Fill lungs and soul with purity,
Casting restraint to the four winds,
And reserve to the far horizon;
To trek with neither clock nor staff,
And rest awhile on seldom stile,
And, turning back at twilight's end,
Behold the power beyond Andromeda,
That guides the destinies of a billion stars –
And mine;
To return then to the fold of the familiar,
Rejoicing in every living cell ...
To live, at last, the inner child,
Confined in later years' cocoon,
Who ne'er at Nature's wonder awed,
Who grew from boy to man too soon.

(‘My Dream’, poem in *Voice Of The Man-child*)

635 **A dedicated teacher?**

The phone call came while I was luxuriating in the Jacuzzi after an arduous day of honest toil. By now accustomed to Fritz's habit of demanding my tutorial skills at any hour, I had had a telephone instrument installed in my sluicing quarters, so that I now contrived to prop the receiver under my ear, at just above water-level, in order to conduct the remote-control language lesson with the least disturbance to my ablutions, thus enabling me to send my mouth into active service, leaving the bubbles and jets to do their therapeutic thing on the rest of my body.

(From ‘Double Up’, story in *In My Write Mind*)

636 **More than one truth**

I thought I had written about this already, but I cannot find it. Anyway, it bears repeating. Earlier in life, I thought that, in any given situation, there could be only one truth. I have discovered that this is by no means always the case.

A single encounter with one of my students, thirty years or more ago, gave me this awareness. We will call her Sarah.

Sarah called to my office one morning in early September of the year in question, about two weeks before her course was due to resume. She had completed the first two academic years and the third year official placement in the hotel industry – in France in her case. She said that she needed to talk, so we went to the canteen, which was quiet at the time, and got ourselves a coffee.

She told me that she had got pregnant by a French boyfriend during the year, and had had an abortion. I asked her how she felt about it now.

She said, ‘What else could I have done? Apart from my boyfriend, whom I hadn’t known for long, and a few work colleagues, I had nobody I could turn to, and I only spoke poor French at the time. I felt completely alone, my family were in Ireland, and there was no way I could face the pregnancy.’

‘I’m sure you’re not happy that you had to take that course, but, in the circumstances, you are still satisfied that it was the only thing you could do?’

‘Yes.’

‘May I ask, then, why you are sharing it with me?’

‘I have always been honest with my parents. I have a wonderful relationship with them, and I have never kept anything important from them. But I haven’t told them about the abortion, and don’t see how I can. I am heartbroken.’

‘How would they react if you told them?’

‘They would be absolutely devastated. What am I to do?’

I prayed a swift, silent prayer, then responded from the heart, ‘In many situations, there is more than one truth operating at the same time. Here you have two: the first truth is that you don’t want to keep something important from your

parents. The second truth is that, if you told them, it would cause them severe, maybe ongoing, distress, and you don't want to hurt them. Sarah, you cannot honour both truths, only one. Which is it to be?'

Her eyes widened and she took a deep breath. 'Of course, I cannot possibly hurt them like that. I love them so much. There is no way I can tell them. I have never been counselled like that before; it was exactly what I needed to hear.'

'I'm not a counsellor, Sarah, just a friend. God bless you. He surely will.'

It's funny how life works. What I said to Sarah came straight out of the blue, and she said it was exactly what she needed to hear. Curiously, it was exactly what I needed to hear as well. It has materially and beneficially altered my view of many subsequent situations.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

637 **Trust no matter what**

Once again
I am lost and floundering,
Wondering what will become of me,
Blind to the light ahead,
Fearing almost everything.
Yet stay, there is no need:
You will not let me founder,
You will not let me go astray.
You did not bring me this far
To let life throw me on its scrap heap;
You did not rescue me from drowning
To let me die then on the beach.
Yes, I am being guided,
Nothing is out of place,
All is well ...
And this I know,
Even when, in darkness,
It seems I know it not.

(‘Reassurance’, poem in *The Power Of Light*)

638 **Impression versus expression**

I have already mentioned ... that I once heard a well-known poet ... being interviewed, and he remarked that our powers of impression are far more highly developed than our powers of expression. We are constantly taking in information from the media and from other people but, generally, putting very little out.

In my case, I notice that when I take in others' notions, emotions and spirituality, there is no room left for my own. That is why, now, I rarely watch television, read newspapers or listen to news bulletins. Equally I am very selective about what books I read and to whom I listen. This has created room for me to be who I really want to be, and to give more of myself to expression. Indeed, while I have not evolved a yardstick to assess such things accurately, it seems to me that I now put out considerably more than I take in. For this I am extremely grateful. What's more, if I had the resources I would be putting out even more, but there is more to be said and written than I am able, with my limited energies, to get on paper.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

639 **Lucille the gentle**

'Anyway, to matters more mundane, one little thing strikes me: from our readers' standpoint, the outcome of this account of how you came to be with me was predictable from quite early on. It doesn't keep one guessing until the denouement which, as I understand it, is what is expected of the skilled author.'

Since, at the time of this conversation, my writing was still in its infancy (and there are those who would claim that it still is), Lucille would have been more than justified in reminding me that I was not a skilled author. True, she loves the truth, but her gentle nature is incapable of spoiling a precious moment and, true to her profession, she came up with a simple and incontrovertible response: 'It's still a lovely story, though!'

(From 'In The Beginning ...', story in *Life With Lucille*)

640 **I don't wish to be insulting, but ...**

'Banks are for the birds, Fred.'

'Decidedly and absolutely,' he returned affably. 'As a matter of fact, I was just marvelling, the last time we walked down by the river, at the profusion of our charming avian brethren that one finds ranged along them.'

'Fred,' I said, perplexed, 'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Banks, dimwit, banks, as in b - a - n - k - s, those grassy things near rivers where one finds birds and various varieties of flora to boot. In short, banks, to which unless my ears deceive me, you were only recently, to wit ten seconds ago, quite clearly alluding. Perhaps this dismal performance of your short-term memory is a sign of approaching dementia!'

'I will refrain from being insulting in return,' I proceeded, heroically restraining myself from calling him a 'sarcastic prick'. 'Indeed, I will even be so charitable as to concede that the misunderstanding was a reasonable one, even if my meaning was conspicuously obvious. Any child over the age of three would have known immediately that I was referring to those usurious institutions which infest our towns and cities and have us all labouring under the illusion that they are providing us with a valuable service.'

(From 'Going Public?', story in *Life With Fred*)

641 **Allowing our adult children to learn**

It is so hard to sit back and watch our adult children suffer, isn't it? I feel very much for you in your deep concern for your daughter and her family. I have kept her daily in my prayers since you first mentioned her situation to me some time ago. Something that I read some years past really helped me. I don't remember the exact words but it ran something like this:

To do things for those we love that they are well capable of doing themselves or preventing them from suffering pain from which they are to learn valuable lessons for life is not a loving thing to do.

(From a letter, November 2005)

642 **How unobservant can you get?**

‘Heavens above, Jasmine! I’ll have to go to Specsavers.’

‘Specsavers? Who or what is Specsavers?’

‘A well-known chain of opticians. We humans often have trouble with our eyes and have to go to an optician to sort it out. That’s why I wear glasses. You did notice that I wear glasses?’

‘Give me a break! Of course I noticed; it’s not me who needs to go to Specsavers. But why do *you* need to when, clearly, you’ve already been?’

‘I really can’t believe it. I’ve known you for a good while now I’m happy to say, but I have only just this minute realised that you haven’t had any wings for the last month or so.’

‘Wings? Who needs wings?’

‘How else do you fly? You used to have them. Don’t you remember the day you tried swimming for the first time, and you couldn’t fly when they got soaking wet?’

‘My lot can take them or leave them. Sometimes I wear them, at other times not. Don’t need them to fly. They’re a sort of fashion accessory I suppose you humans would call them. As for the time I couldn’t fly when I got wet, it was simply because they were too bloody heavy. Have you ever tried to fly with wet wings?’

‘This may come as a surprise, Jasmine, but actually I’ve never tried to fly at all!’

She laughed.

‘Why didn’t you just take them off?’

Jasmine seemed abashed. ‘Um ... because they’re difficult to ... er ... I forgot actually!’

Now I laughed.

‘But,’ I continued, ‘you surely have to have wings. Fairies always have wings for goodness’ sake.’

‘You’ve been reading too many children’s books, Ken.’

(From ‘Mirth And Moisture’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

643 **Lavender teaches a lesson**

‘Okay. So, a sprig of lavender?’

‘Yes. Lavender blossoms are very pretty in their own way, and have a delicate pastel colour, but one would hardly describe them as exotic, and one cannot smell much, if anything, when one passes them by. However, if you apply gentle pressure to the blossom it leaves the most exquisite fragrance on your skin. Lavender has always been my favourite.’

Robert squeezed the blossom then raised his fingers to his nostrils. ‘Mmm! You’re right. Lovely. I wonder why it does that?’

‘I very much doubt that botanists would agree with me, but I rather imagine that it interprets the firm touch as love and then responds in love by giving off this lovely perfume. Incidentally, in the language of lovers, lavender symbolises constancy and devotion.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

644 **The gift of humanity**

However, that of which I write is ultimately beyond the realm of language, the intellect, reason, or any other finite, human faculty. It is pure spirit. And pure spirit is essentially (i.e. in essence) what I am. This is not to say that my spirit is detached and separate from my humanity. On the contrary, they are intimately intertwined and, in a way I cannot begin to describe, I will always be human. However, the human always attempts to define, absorb and mould the spirit – until the penny drops! In reality, what happens is quite the reverse: the spirit defines, absorbs and moulds the human. This process is an integral part of the wonder of my uniqueness and is why I will be human (though presumably on a more elevated plane!) for all eternity. To view things any other way would be to view my humanness as a cross to carry, a temporary millstone which I will cast off at the end of this life. That would be a greatly impoverished view of the amazing gift of my humanity.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

645 **Time to change**

Let me drink of the well that has sustained me
With life-giving water for so long;
Let me drink even a drop,
Just the tiniest drop.
But when I pull up the bucket,
On a decaying rope,
It is dry and dusty,
Cracking at the joints,
For it – poor inanimate receptacle –
Has long since forgotten
The taste and touch of water,
Long since ceased to experience
Its caressing, penetrating softness,
And therefore disintegrates slowly;
And I am left with the arid truth
That the precious well
Has finally run dry.

(From 'Water, Water Everywhere ...', poem in
No Rest For The Wicked)

646 **Don't try to understand God's ways**

I do not know why you waited
Till the well ran dry
And I was left for dead.
Indeed, I do not need to know
For your ways ever transcend mine.
I only know that you reached out
From beyond the far horizon
Inundated me with the waters of Love
And restored me to life.

(From 'The Well', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

647 **Lucille spots my Achilles' heel**

'Buying new furniture is a tiresome business, Lucille. I thought it was a simple matter of selecting a new suite, but every one we liked clashes with the carpet, which admittedly has seen better days. So, we went looking at carpets, and chose one which, while undoubtedly the cat's pyjamas, doesn't match the curtains, so now they've got to be replaced; and if they go, the lamp shades won't fit in. On top of that, the room will need completely redecorating – emulsion, gloss, varnish, and all that sort of thing – before these costly new items are put in place. Just think of the outrageous expense and the unnecessary disruption. The present suite, though showing its age, is fine. And anyway, once you start down the road of refurbishment, you only stir up a hornet's nest. I mean, where in God's name will it all end? First, we'll have to change the house to suit the newly done room, then the neighbourhood to suit the house, the city to suit the neighbourhood, the country to suit the city and, before you know it, we will have embarked on a mission to change the whole fucking world. Oh, dear; pardon my language, Lucille, but I'm feeling decidedly piqued, and it sort of slipped out.'

Lucille laughed. 'So, you hate painting.'

I should have known that Lucille would detect what most irked me about the scenario, but her insight still took me by surprise. She has this uncanny knack of spotting my Achilles' heels at a thousand paces.

'Er ... yes,' I admitted grumpily, 'absolutely loathe it.'

(From 'Heart In The Right Place', story in *Life With Lucille*)

648 **Happy new what?**

On the first publication day of 2016, I called into my local newsagents. One of the tabloids had an enormous headline taking up the entire front page: HAPPY NEW YEAR. The headlines of all the other newspapers offered, mostly in graphic detail, the numerous reasons why we shouldn't be happy!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

649 **Fred and I see eye to eye**

'I'm not sorry to see the demise of the expiring year, Fred. It had its high points, its mountain summits if you wish, but they were few and far between; dark valleys mostly, twisty roads with loads of potholes. Yes, I'm glad it's nearly over.'

'Me too,' said Fred with a sigh.

'What?'

'I said "Me too." You gone deaf or something?'

'No need to get stroppy, Fred. It's just that I can't believe that you're agreeing with me unreservedly. It's not your style.'

'I suppose not,' my resident sidekick agreed. 'But I find it hard to disagree with your sentiments regarding the year which is about to extinguish itself in ... what time is it?'

'Eleven fifty-seven.'

'... in three minutes. I don't know if I can stand even another three minutes of it.'

(From 'New Year', story in *Life With Fred*)

650 **Do we get the media we deserve**

'But there are many, many good, even wonderful, things happening in the world too.'

'Yes, but ...'

'But they don't make the headlines. Walk into any newsagent and scan the various publications on display. Almost all of them will be proclaiming the bad and the sad, or, as you put it in your essay 'Daily Bread', they are full of negativity, distortion and sleaze. Strong words, but largely true.'

'Now, that's an interesting point, Lucille. In the same essay, I suggested that we get the media we deserve. So the reason we have such a deluge of all that depressing stuff, is that the public is lapping it up like thirsty camels. Then the same public will complain that it's all bad news. There's a certain perversity in that. I wonder why.'

'I have no idea. I and my eight sisters have often pondered the same question. You humans are hard to understand.'

(From 'This One's On Me', story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

651 **Nature's balm**

Walks in Nature are very good for me. I learn to appreciate the beauty and wonder of simple things, and from that I get a sense of *gratitude*, which in turn diminishes the emotional turmoil. I am fortunate to live near a rugged but beautiful region called Connemara, which I once spontaneously described as my spiritual home. I experience a mystical quality there that I find nowhere else in the world that I have visited. But it can be a corner of your garden or your local park, or simply gazing at the pretty flowers in your window box if you are a city dweller. All that matters is that you feel safe and find a measure of peace there.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

652 **Perfectionism – the wordless foe**

Particularly because I have a very healthy sense of self-esteem, the inner voice has learned that there is no point in telling me directly that I am a failure or that I am a third-rate human being because I would immediately tell it to go and f*** off! So it has resorted to manifesting in a sort of voiceless, creeping malaise that can be there for days before it dawns on me that it is the old enemy, perfectionism, insidiously infiltrating my psyche without saying a word.

(From a letter, December 2003)

653 **Lucille gets cross**

Lucille raised a stern eyebrow – at least, the nearest thing to a stern eyebrow that one as gentle as she is capable of raising – and gave me a withering look from under same with a hazel eye. Well actually she gave me a withering look with both eyes but it was only one eyebrow that was raised, hence I use ‘eye’ in the singular, if you get my drift. What’s that? This is no time for getting technical, and why don’t I bloody well get on with it? Yes, you’re quite right, dear reader. Apologies! Anyway, I wilted under the said withering look ...

(From ‘Complimentary Medicine’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

654 **Proof of the pudding ...**

How, then, do I know that this spiritual awakening [in July 2000], this presence of the eternal if you prefer (which has never left me in the intervening seventeen years), is not my imagination? The answer is obvious but only came to me about five years ago: at a conscious level, my imagination has *never* been able to take something unreal and delude me into thinking that it was real, not even for a moment. On a very few occasions, at a semiconscious level, the imagination has made a vivid dream – usually a nightmare – seem real, but only for a few seconds. In that foggy, halfway stage between sleeping and waking, I think, ‘Oh, My God, what a terrible experience!’ After only a few moments, the mists of slumber clear, I breathe a sigh of relief and say, ‘Whew! It was only a dream.’ Yet this incredible presence has been with me continuously for seventeen years, even in my darkest hours when I might be tempted to throw all belief out of the window. For the reason stated, then, I have incontrovertible evidence that my imagination is utterly incapable of taking something unreal and making it seem real, non-stop, for seventeen years. Seventeen seconds maybe, at a stretch, but seventeen years? No way! Thank God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

655 **Hang in ...**

Like you, I know that it is in these places of deepest darkness that I find the treasure (you put it beautifully), but when I am in them I completely lose sight of that and can feel utterly abandoned. That is why it is so dark; if there was even a glimmer of light, it wouldn’t be the darkness, but a sort of twilight where there is at least some light to see my way forward. I think I am just coming to some sort of understanding that when I fight this darkness, it only gets worse, tightens its hold on me, so to speak. Fighting it is like trying to stop a tidal wave with the lid of a cooking pot. So, I just hang in till it passes, and then I find the treasure.

(From a letter, May 2004)

656 **The highest vocation**

I believe that by far the highest vocation is simply to *receive* God's infinite, steadfast, unconditional love – and this is a vocation to which we are all called. Thereafter, the highest calling is surely to give life to, and then nurture, the next generation of human beings.

One could put it differently: in an ideal world, receiving God's love would be as natural as breathing, in which case there would be about as much need to point it out as the highest calling as there would be to remind people that they should breathe. In other words, receiving God's love is our natural state. In the real world, however, it gets buried under the myriad vagaries of the human condition, including our parenting, education, religious formation, social conditioning and more. What I am getting around to is that, *for all practical purposes*, by far the greatest vocation on Earth is to give life to, and then nurture, the next generation of human beings. Parents, please take note, and recognise the immense value of what you are doing.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

657 **The faithfulness of a child**

The fog falls and fills my mind,
Dims the life-giving light,
Obscures the path ahead
And causes me to stumble.
But I wait a while till the sun burns through
And illumines me again – its primal purpose.
But what, then, shall I do
When the fog is so dense,
Seemingly impenetrable,
And lasts for so long
That darkness spawns the belief
That the sun has gone away?

In times like these,
I need the faithfulness of a child.

(From 'The Faithfulness Of A Child', poem in *The Power Of Light*)

658 **We all see things differently**

The day delivers a torrential downpour.
I have just come from a drought-ravaged country in Africa
And you from the monsoon season in India.
To you, yet another dreadful deluge,
More dismal, soaking wetness.
To me, after air, the most life-giving substance on Earth,
Nectar of the gods,
For a cupful of which
The people I have just left would give their inheritance.

(From 'In The Eye Of The Beholder', poem in *Overdoing It!*)

659 **Sacrifice?**

I have never come across anybody who thinks of the word 'sacrifice' in a positive context, or welcomes the practices and deprivations that are almost always associated with it. In the tradition in which I was raised, the prevailing belief was that, if you were to win God's favour, you had to make 'sacrifices', that is, burn yourself up in service, do not count the cost, offer the resulting pain up for the holy souls in Purgatory, and further exhortations of that ilk.

In complete contrast, it is interesting to note that 'sacrifice' derives from two Latin words: *sacer*, meaning primarily sacred or holy, and *facere*, meaning to make. Thus: to make sacred. There are various dictionary definitions of 'sacred', but, to me, the word has always meant that which is precious, pure, estimable beyond measure, immutable and eternal.

So, what is it that makes sacred? Endless service and painful deprivation? No. Love. God's love. God's infinite, steadfast, unconditional Love, given freely. That's all we need. Of course, we will give service, and, life being life, there will be deprivations, but we give and accept these as a heartfelt, spontaneous response to that irresistible divine Love, rather than bear them as onerous burdens in order to win God's favour, or, as many like to put it, do what pleases God. From

my vantage point, based on profound, long-term experience, the only things that please God are our acceptance of his Love and our intuitive love response to it, freely given.

Somewhere along the line, somebody got it very wrong.

I have just read this passage in Melody Beattie's book, *Journey To The Heart*. It is a book of daily reflections and, 'coincidentally', it is the entry for the day on which I am writing this reflection. It is an appropriate note on which to conclude:

Life is not an endurance contest. Not anymore. We are not in a race to see how long we can go without, how much we can go without, how much pain we can stay in. Although sometimes we can go through dry spells and droughts, we are not cactuses.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

660 **How to win friends and influence people**

There are a number of sure-fire methods for getting on the wrong side of good friends. One is to borrow their favourite book and never return it. Another is to read them too much of your poetry. While having the common sense not to perpetrate the former and the wisdom not to indulge in the latter (most of the time), I nevertheless have a hankering to make my works-of-genius/absolute drivel (according to perception) available to a wider audience than one – me. This is the *raison d'être* for this collection; you can thus choose for yourself how much or how little to absorb, without having to listen me drone on – which of course I'd be delighted to do if requested! ...

I write all my pieces to be read aloud. Once they are written in first draft, I read them out loud to myself, and keep changing them until they sound right *to me*. If you think you can muster the fortitude to withstand the derogatory remarks of the people with whom you live, you might like to try reading them aloud for yourself.

(From the Introduction to *Homage To A Future Hero*)

661 **Emotional intelligence**

The concept of measuring intelligence has been with us since 1905, and more's the pity. How many of us either suspect or have had 'confirmed' that we have a low 'IQ' – a contrived yardstick which, in my view, ought now to be discredited. Most of us have spent between the ages of four to eighteen in primary and secondary school, a period I have heard one enlightened expert describe as 'a benevolent open prison', at the termination of which, we are measured on 14 years' work by being closeted in a room for approximately 18 hours without reference to any outside source, a situation which we will rarely encounter in the real world. The result is that many of us emerge with a poor exit performance in state exams, and a correspondingly low view of our 'intelligence'. And, as if we hadn't had enough, those of us who get enough 'points' deposit ourselves in third-level education and subject ourselves to more of the same!

Thank God for scholars like Daniel Goleman who are highlighting the concept of 'emotional intelligence' which acknowledges the immense worth of humanness, communication, empathy, caring, intuition, humour, creativity, persistence and common sense. Personally, I value these qualities infinitely more than sheer brainpower. One example doesn't make the case, but I have an acquaintance who acquires degrees like my windscreen acquires squashed flies on a hot summer's day, but hasn't a bit of what the Irish call 'cop on' (common sense). Oh, give me cop on any day!

(From Part 2 of *Getting The Balance Right – Lecturer's Seminar Guide*)

662 **Letter from a struggling believer**

Dear God,
Your will be done, not mine.
Love,
Me

PS What I really mean, God, is my will be done not yours, but I know I'm not supposed to say that. So I won't!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

663 **Our personal identity – just a bunch of labels?**

There I was, sitting on the edge of an unknown river, gazing disconsolately into its deep waters, contemplating my sorrowful condition, wrapped in self-pity. Thousands of miles from my own country, I had been robbed of all my possessions, including my passport, so that I could not now even prove my identity – no longer a person with a label, just a blob of lost humanity crouched on a nameless river bank.

(From 'A Cautionary Tale', story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

664 **Power corrupts**

It is said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I think not. Certainly power corrupts but power is relative not absolute. Thus, military domination is only that until a stronger military power emerges. Intellectual primacy is only that until a brighter intellect comes forth. Today, it would seem, who holds the most information holds the most power, but only until another acquires even more information.

There is one exception to this pattern of relative power: love. Love is the only absolute power, and only one possesses it absolutely: God. And God is incorruptible.

We can rephrase then: power corrupts, great power corrupts greatly, but absolute power is incorruptible.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

665 **There is always hope**

If all the world were wholly bad
And all mankind forlorn and sad;
If wickedness reigned everywhere,
And none for no one had a care;
If grim travail were mankind's lot,
Pervasive evil all he'd got;
If then, from all this cosmic blight,
A single good thing came to light,
There would still be hope.

(‘Never Say Never’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

666 **Teach religion?***

I have, over the years, heard it said, that religion should not be taught to children; rather, let them decide for themselves as they grow up. This sounds okay in theory, but if they have no grounding in religion, what might interest them in searching further afield later?

In virtually every other major facet of life, we do encourage children to follow their own paths, but only after we have given them a solid grounding in the basic disciplines, for example reading, writing, mathematics, and imparting a sense of self-esteem, a social conscience and a healthy work ethic. Children who do not receive this grounding or who receive a very inadequate one frequently struggle in later life.

Why, then, should the spiritual life be an exception? Possibly because we have seen the havoc caused by religious extremism, and so we conclude that all religion is suspect or even dangerous. And, let's be honest, there is more than a modicum of truth in that view ...

I suppose what I am saying is that I would like to see children be given a solid sense of God when they are young – primarily spirituality rather than primarily religion in other words – so that they might have a basis on which to base their personal search later on. What I imagine will always remain problematic is how this is to be done appropriately and by whom ...

On further thought, perhaps a beginning is to suggest to parents that, if they do nothing else in this context for their children, at least teach them – last thing at night maybe – to give thanks to a higher power (or whatever term they are comfortable with) for all the good in their lives, to ask for help with the not-so-good, and also, importantly, to ask for others. I believe even this little would provide a foundation on which to build, if the child so desires, in later life.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* There is a full essay, based on this item, entitled 'Higher Values For Our Children?' in *Beyond The Rainbow*, extracts from which are given throughout this book.

667 **When Fred gets too much for me**

‘What did you do that for, you silly ass?’ said Fred, sporting one of his impish grins – a grimace more like. He was endeavouring to look superior but the effect was more on the grotesque side. ‘One would think you’d be more careful. I mean, you’re the one who’s supposed to be so goddam efficient. What are we going to do now?’

I snorted in disgust, disdain, dismay, hurt pride and an assortment of similar sentiments, and gave him what would have passed for – had he been the visible variety of excrescence – a scorchingly withering look. But it was wasted on him. I felt the least I could have expected was a substantial measure of solidarity, and this supercilious sniper fire was what I needed right now like the proverbial cavity in the cranium. The ignorant swine knew bloody well that nobody in his right mind, or indeed nobody in his left mind, deliberately takes up even temporary residence in the middle of nowhere, at the side of a desolate country road, on a blisteringly cold night, bereft of outer layers of insulation, i.e. coatless and jacketless, desperately wondering what the hell to do next. To make matters worse my mobile phone’s battery had died about twenty minutes earlier. Moreover, Fred had nothing to moan about; he was nice and cosy and warm inside my head. Anyway, be that as it may, and despite my acute discomfiture and the urgent need to take corrective action re my situation, I determined, for once, to have the last word.

‘Let’s put it this way, Fred,’ I sniped back, my teeth chattering like a garrulous monkey, ‘there are multitudinous occasions – and this is unquestionably one of them – when I would gladly surrender unto half my kingdom, if I could lock you, you pestilential little blot on my cerebral landscape, out as effectively as I have just locked my blasted car keys in.’

(‘Nosy Parker’, story in *Life With Fred*)

668 **Changing one’s mind**

Contrary to popular belief, it is actually okay to change one’s mind.
(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

669 **Staying young**

When I move on from age to age,
I leave a piece behind
That grows no more.
What went before
Stays static in my mind.
So now that I'm in autumn years,
The most of me is younger,
Which leaves me at the latest stage
With a rapt and curious hunger
To know how much of me has grown,
How much has ne'er moved on;
And all I do is look to you
And the questioning is gone,
For this is truly how I grow:
You tell me all I need to know.
Thus, when they ask my current age,
I answer seriously and sage:
My body's sixty,
My mind but fifty,
My outlook forty,
My dreams are thirty,
My heart is twenty,
My hopes mid-teens,
My faith but three
And my love a babe in arms.
Yet, my memories all are dateless,
E'er but present replication,
My spirit's free and timeless,
Far beyond Earth's limitation,
And my destiny is endless,
Passing count and calculation ...
For I am a man of all ages
And none.

(‘Man Of All Ages’ - Poem in *Voice Of The Man-child*)

670 **Home is where the spirit is**

I will arise and go now,
A sanctuary to visit,
Some place, some hallowed shrine,
To give thanks and make petition,
As my forbears have before me,
In observance of tradition,
Since the genesis of time.
But whither shall I go?
Some near or distant Mecca,
An apt antidote to here –
The humdrum and profane
Or so, 'twould seem, implied?
Here where I've endured
Such nights of sleepless anguish
And arose to battle on;
Here where I've secured
Such nights of restful slumber
And arose to childish prattle
Of my four, nursed to maturity;
Here where I've encountered
Every human feeling
From desire to deep despair,
But e'er leavened by the love
Of those who dwell here with me;
Where I have lived my only life
From the alpha to the omega,
Sustained my crucifixion,
Besought the one eternal
And attained a resurrection
In the autumn of my years.
Oh, what need have I of pilgrimage
When my home is holy ground?

(From 'Holy Ground', poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

671 **Late vocation?**

‘This business of living life one day at a time is terrific, Fred.’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed my psychic sidekick.

‘Arise to the new day,’ I continued, enthusiastically, ‘live it, whether rain or shine, to the best of one’s ability, then, at day’s end, return joyfully to the arms of Morpheus, knowing that this one day contained all life, all endeavour, all achievement, all truth. No yesterday, no tomorrow, only today. I am heartily sorry that I didn’t think of conducting my life in this fashion long before now.’

‘A great pity, indeed,’ said Fred, in a fitting tone of regret.

‘Yet here, however, we find ourselves impaled on the horns of a dilemma: awoken by some unknown stimulus at three of the a.m., and, unable to secure immediate repatriation to the land of dreams, we sit sipping tea in the hope that the magic potion – the merits of which I have had occasion to extol elsewhere – will induce renewed slumber ere long.’

‘True, but in what point do you perceive a dilemma?’

My cerebral companion can be a bit slow when his sleep pattern is disturbed, so I proceeded to fill in the blanks: ‘You will agree, I am sure, Fred, that yesterday is over?’

‘Er, yes.’

‘And you will doubtless concede that tomorrow is not yet here?’

‘Um, yes.’

‘But we are unquestionably not asleep?’

‘Er, no.’

‘And since we’re supposed to be asleep, one can hardly call it today, can one?’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘Therein, my dear old delayed reaction, lies the aforesaid dilemma. If it is not yesterday, not tomorrow, nor yet today, what, precisely, does one call it?’

The penny dropped: ‘Ah, I see,’ said Fred; then continuing after some reflection, ‘How about interregnum?’

‘Between kings, governments and such, Fred. Won’t do. We’re looking for a term that suggests between days.’

‘*Sede vacante?*’ he suggested.

‘Between popes, old thing. That won’t do either. I really don’t know what we should call it.’

We took another long, thoughtful sip.

‘I do,’ said Fred after a longish pause, his eyelids drooping.

‘You do?’

‘Yeees,’ he drawled, with an expansive yawn, ‘let’s call it a day.’

(‘One Day At A Time’, story in *Life With Fred*)

672 **God’s love is ...**

The words I always use of God’s love ... are ‘infinite, steadfast, unconditional’ because that is the way in which I experience his love ...

It is worth noting that the three words ‘infinite, ‘steadfast’ and ‘unconditional,’ in the way that I use them here, are absolute, that is they cannot be qualified in any way. God’s love cannot be rather infinite, somewhat steadfast or a little bit unconditional. His love either is these three things or it isn’t. And since *He is* – a term which is equally absolute (i.e. God is unchanging and unchangeable), then his love *also is* ...

One could reasonably postulate that the word ‘Divine’ encapsulates all this. Perhaps, but for me it is a word to which unacceptable subordinate meanings are often attached, e.g. remote and inaccessible, holy in the sense of sanctimonious and condescending, demanding of our praise, the ultimate judge and so on. The words I have selected are also open to misinterpretation, but are at least more descriptive and, which is important to me, more accurate.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

673 **The emptiness of some religious rituals**

Somehow,
Despite our best efforts,
We seem to have lost sight
Of the shepherd.

(From ‘Impaired Vision’, poem in *Hang On!*)

674 **Perfectionism – a new view**

Perfectionism is held out by many as a defect of character and I bought and internalised this view in its entirety – until last week (May 2003), when I woke up!

There is nothing wrong with wanting to do things really well. In business, they used to call it the search for excellence; likewise valid, then, to seek excellence in one's personal endeavours and life in general. For me, it is only the top end of perfectionism that is a defect of character, i.e. when it turns into obsessive thinking or action.

I am now in the happy situation that I can look back over my life to date, both professional and private, and see the ways in which my perfectionism has produced wonderful, painstaking work from which I and many others have benefited greatly, particularly, in my own case, in terms of spiritual growth. I am deeply grateful. Thank God for perfectionism, as delineated here, but preserve me from obsessiveness.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

675 **An alternative to competition?**

And can one criticise any sporting and leisure activities that keep people – especially young people – healthily occupied instead of being drawn into the abyss of drink, drugs and other obsessions? Hardly, it would seem. But if the primary focus of these activities is to coach people to be competitive and win, how many who don't make the grade will be damaged in the process, thinking of themselves as inadequate or failures? And is involving people in competitive sport in order to deflect them from harmful practices, a case of engaging the lesser evil to combat the greater? Is there available to us an as yet undiscovered, even undreamt of realm of playing sport and engaging in other formerly competitive activities where the accolades would be for co-operation rather than winning out in competition?

(From 'Are We Meant To Be Competitive?',
essay in *In My Write Mind*)

676 **On being asked to critique somebody's writing**

Thank you for getting in touch and for sharing your lovely writing with me. It is said that what comes from the heart goes to the heart, and I can see that almost every word was mined from that deep inner place within you. I really enjoyed reading your work.

You asked me to give you my opinion of your writing. I never do that because I do not consider myself qualified to critique anybody else's work. Perhaps if I tell you a little about my own approach to writing you will see why. I have only one requirement for my writing and that is it must nurture *me*. When I write with one eye on publication and the other on what people might think of my work, the joy goes out of it almost immediately. This means that if I write something and I like it, then it is good, even if the rest of the world thinks it's garbage. Or to put it another way, I am quite content to be the sole member of my fan club! However, that does not mean that I am not pleased when somebody tells me that they enjoyed my writing or found it helpful. Of course I am; but that is a bonus not the primary purpose of the work. This is a great freedom, for it means that I can write from the heart, without being influenced by outside agendas. All this being the case, you will see that I consider each writer unique – as you are – and would not dream of setting myself up as a critic. But what I can do is to tell you, as I did at the start, that your writing is beautiful and I hope you will continue to develop it, perhaps experimenting with different approaches as time goes by, listening carefully to the inner nudges that may tell you the way to go.

(From a letter, August 2015)

677 **Living in the light**

I was born in the light and I need to live in the light. I can survive for but a limited period in the darkness, and then only when the light is replaced by Love to see me through to the dawn – as it always is.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

678 **Old head on young shoulders**

‘Did I tell you what my six-year-old granddaughter said when I visited her and her family in Munich last June?’

‘I heard about the intrepid Granda who went careering down water slides and mountain biking after a lapse of forty years. But I don’t recall you telling me anything particular about the darling little girl.’

‘One evening, she brought over a book of fairy stories, asked me to choose one and read it to her. So I thumbed through the pages until I found it. ‘Ah,’ I said. ‘Cinderella! That’s my favourite fairy story.’ Upon which, she put her hands on her hips, looked me straight in the eye and said, “Oh, so you’re into girls!” You could have knocked me down with a feather.’

(From ‘Mirth And Moisture’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

679 **Sounds silly, but ...**

Your holiness,

I realise that there must be recognised and approved channels for processing this sort of thing, but I thought I would appeal to you directly. Nothing like going straight to the top, I always think, especially when the issue I wish to bring to your notice might be considered a trifle unorthodox.

Not to put a tooth in it, I move the case for the canonisation of P.G. Wodehouse, creator of Jeeves and Wooster, Lord Emsworth, Mr Mulliner, The Oldest Member and other immortal characters. Incidentally, the P.G. stands for Pelham Grenville, but his friends knew him as ‘Plum’. Why do I propose him for this distinction? Because he has performed sufficient miracles in me alone to warrant sainthood. Time out of number, he has done the impossible and extracted me from impenetrable gloom with his masterfully humorous stories. And even a cursory look at the record will show that he has performed the same miracle for countless others. Indeed, if I were to list the influences which have helped to sustain me through a long and – to say the least – challenging life, the writings of Plum Wodehouse

would almost certainly be in the top five. Many years ago, the noted author, Evelyn Waugh, said of him, ‘Mr Wodehouse’s idyllic world can never stale. He will continue to release future generations from captivity that may be more irksome than our own.’ All over the world, and through the medium of many languages, this prophecy has been fulfilled beyond measure.

In short, he was recognised as a comic genius in his lifetime, and was knighted by the Queen, but I believe ‘St Plum’ would be a more appropriate appellation at this point in history, so that many more will come to benefit from his unique ministry. I am certain that, through his intercession, myriad men and women will have their sense of humour restored, enhanced, or, for those poor souls who don’t have one, even created.

In the event that you are not familiar with his work, I enclose a copy of *Benissimo Jeeves** to support my case. Once you have read it (and I respectfully suggest that you choose a day when you are feeling decidedly off colour for the purpose), and experienced for yourself the amazingly restorative quality of his work, I have no doubt but that I can look forward to being at the canonisation celebrations in Rome before long.

Wishing your holiness a rollicking good laugh and many other blessings.

Yours most sincerely ...

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Italian edition of *Very Good, Jeeves*.

680 **Pray anyway**

‘What will you do? Simple. Pray.’

‘Sorry, Dad, I know how important this is to you, but when I see what’s going on in the world, I just don’t believe in all that God stuff any more.’

‘Greg, what in heaven’s name has that got to do with it? I didn’t ask you to believe. Just pray!’

(From ‘The Dance Goes On’, draft sequel to the novel *Black On Magenta*)

681 **Dubious accolade!**

Incidentally, it strikes me that, the way things are going, I could, in the fullness of time, become one of the world's most prolific, unpublished authors!

(From 'That's Confidence', story in *Life With Lucille*)

682 **Do you think I'm a little confused?**

I was in a most unusual frame of mind, uncomfortable as well, puzzling in fact. So I decided to apprise Fred of my dilemma as best I could: 'You don't know what it's like, Fred.'

'Don't know what what's like?'

'Being like this.'

'Being like what?'

'You know; like the way I am right now.'

'No. I don't know, blast you! What way *are* you right now, for goodness' sake?' he said impatiently.

'Well, er ... that way, if you know what I'm getting at. I mean, it's kind of difficult to describe. I am currently immersed in one of those states of being that one can experience and visualise but cannot suitably clothe with words. Such inadequate things words, don't you think? You see, the problem runs roughly as follows: from one standpoint, I'm what you might call thingummyjigged but, looking at it another way, I'm more or less what-have-you'd. Then there's the dilemma that sometimes I think I have a leaning in the direction of the one but, at other times, I rather fancy that I'm veering toward the other; I really can't make up my mind. But, as I was saying, I just can't muster the words to describe it; they elude me, the little buggers, and my inability to come up with an adequate description is driving me bananas – or is it oranges? No, definitely bananas. Strange expression, that. It's all very bewildering, if you ask me.'

'I did bloody well ask you,' snapped the exasperated Fred. 'And I don't know what the hell you're talking about. If you ask *me*, you're just being infuriatingly enigmatic and bringing vacillation to an art form, and all just to annoy me.'

(From 'A Blessing – Sort Of!', story in *Life With Fred*)

683 **On reaching one's majority**

An expression one often hears is 'Now that I am eighteen, I can do what I like.' If you swallow that belief whole, you can add to it by saying things like, 'I can drink all I like, I can experiment with drugs if I want to; where members of the opposite sex are concerned, I can have all the fun I choose,' and so it goes on. The reality is that, in this day and age, it is all too easy to cross the line into alcoholism, drug addiction and promiscuity ... Of course compulsions aren't limited to these three. One can be compulsively irresponsible, compulsively lazy, compulsively dishonest, compulsive about relationships, compulsive about virtually anything!

And why do these things cause so much trouble? It is simply because the belief that 'Now that I am eighteen, I can do what I like ...' is only half a truth. The other half, which so many overlook or are unaware of is, '... provided I am willing to pay the price.' To overlook this second half of the truth is to walk into treacherous quicksand.

Another widespread belief held by young and old alike is: 'That couldn't happen to me.' This is nonsense, of course. None of us have any exemption from life.

(From a letter, January 2013)

684 **Truth gives life**

It is not really air, food, water and rest that give me life, it is *truth*. I need truth more than I need life, for if I have truth I will have life even if I die. But if I listen to, and live in, the lie in whatever form it comes, there can be no real life in me. That is why, when the chips – my chips – are really down, whatever other help I might ask for, my most heartfelt prayer is, 'I must have truth!' This is virtually the most important thing for me to do since truth can be elusive and often appears heavily camouflaged. It could be said that it is more important for me to pray for love. But truth is the fruit of love so there is no conflict here. Besides, I am loved all the time without needing to ask.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

685 **Of a particular kind of journalist**

I examined the undesirable-looking specimen that had manifested on my doorstep, and discovered that it was a species of journalist from one of those toxic tabloids (not the sort you read, of course) which currently pollute the planet. Provocative, pitiless and unprincipled, these pint-sized pestilences explicitly exploit sex, thereby living off immoral earnings, and, day in day out, make human sacrifice in order to gratify their insatiable appetite for maliciously manipulating the manifold misery of mankind.

(From 'No Comment', story in *In My Write Mind*)

686 **Recipe for writing**

I take my writing very seriously, but I am not serious about my writing. Seriousness is far too great a burden for me to carry, and I have only one specification for each piece that I write: it must nurture me. I must enjoy both the process and the final outcome. By this, I mean that I apply myself with earnestness and enthusiasm to what my pen produces, but I rarely allow myself to become concerned with the validation of others, with measuring up to the artificial standards of the literary establishment, or permit myself to become preoccupied with publication.

(From 'The Maverick', essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

687 **Are we good or bad?**

One of the many erroneous notions I absorbed, to my cost, in early life is that we are inherently bad and conduct a lifelong struggle to become good. This is hardly surprising; the tradition in which I was raised told me, as soon as I was old enough to understand the words, that I was born with the stain of original sin on my soul or, to put it another way, that, even as a tiny baby I was fundamentally flawed ...

Since we are made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), the truth must surely be that we are inherently good.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

PART TWO

In A Nutshell

Nuts!

*I come from a cultural background
which considers that anyone who
goes to a psychiatrist ought to
have his head examined.*

In A Nutshell

Mine had always been a carefree, easy-going personality, happy-go-lucky you might say, until, one fateful day, I did one of those self-administered psychological tests that one finds now and again in the Sunday newspapers. Just for a bit of fun, so I thought. I was appalled; for the first time in my life, and to my utter dismay, I discovered that all was not well.

The following morning, I phoned my place of work to say I wouldn't be in, and presented myself post-haste at my doctor's surgery.

'All is not well,' I informed him. When the preliminaries unearthed nothing of significance, he despatched me, for tests, to the local hospital where they prodded this, examined that, investigated the other and X-rayed everything.

'You'll be pleased to hear that you are an exemplary specimen,' he announced on receiving the results. Now I'm pretty articulate and well versed in the ways of the world, but, for some reason, I had never encountered an exemplary specimen, so was at a bit of a loss to know what to make of this pronouncement. However, he continued in a comforting tone: 'I wish I had your heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and blood count. Or, to put it another way, you're as fit as a fiddle.'

I have always been fascinated with language, its evolution and usage, and I was about to remark to the good doctor that I have never been able to figure out why this particular cliché continues to enjoy such popularity. When you come to think

of it, there is no logical reason for concluding that a violin should be in better shape than any other musical instrument worth its salt. A violin is a violin, just as a tuba is a tuba, or a bassoon a bassoon. Mind you, I have to concede that ‘fit as a fiddle’ has a pleasing alliterative ring to it. The expressions ‘fit as a tuba’ and ‘healthy as a bassoon’ don’t sound right, do they? But this was no time for a light and bright discussion on the origins of idioms. And anyway there were other patients suffering in silence in the waiting room, and I’m a pretty considerate sort of fellow, coupled with the fact that I was feeling like a hangover without an owner. So I shoved a sock in it.

‘That’s all very fine,’ I whimpered, ‘but all is not well.’

He’d known me for a long time and was basically a compassionate man, so he humoured me. After a moment’s silent deliberation, he recommended that I write down everything that was bothering me and let him have a look at it.

‘There is nothing,’ he assured me, ‘like writing it all down to get it out of your system.’

I didn’t fancy writing it all down but it was a novel idea, and I like novel ideas, so I did. I commenced with ‘All is not well’ and terminated, seventy-three foolscap pages later, with ‘To be continued’. I then fed the document to the doctor’s letter box indicating, on one of those sticky bits of paper, that I would call to his surgery in a week or so when he had had time to digest and analyse the contents.

‘You’re right,’ he said on seeing me, ‘all is not well. I’ve been reading your file. It’s interesting, very interesting; you are somehow different, not displaying any of the usual symptoms, and I just cannot put a label on your condition.’ However, he undertook to work on it with me over the ensuing months, during which time he plied me with potions, lotions, diets, exercise regimes and the best of advice, but I continued to go downhill. Now, I’m not stupid, as you will probably have gathered already, so I decided to point out – with sensitivity for his professional feelings of course – that we were getting nowhere. Relieved, he admitted that the thing had him beaten and that there were other people out there who were not half

as bad as me to whom he should really be devoting his time. He looked a little distraught, but I encouraged him in his efforts and told him not to feel bad about it. He sighed, thanked me warmly for the incredible amount he had learned from me and said he was referring me to an eminent psychiatrist.

I was apprehensive, even reluctant, for I come from a cultural background which considers that anyone who goes to a psychiatrist ought to have his head examined. But it was a new avenue to be explored, and I never could resist new avenues, so I went.

‘All is not well,’ I said. He motioned me to the couch but I declined, for there are some things that even I will not do. As far as I was concerned, couches figured only in movies and cartoons; I never dreamed that they existed in real life. So we took up positions on opposite sides of his large, antique desk. I surveyed him with an inquiring eye before getting down to business: he was certainly very eminent. I mean, he looked eminent and had the superior manner and piercing, mind-reading eyes that one associates with psychiatrists, and which have intimidated so many of my fellow-sufferers. Not me of course; I’m different – my doctor told me so. Indeed, I was eagerly waiting for him to begin the session so that I could evaluate his methods.

‘I’ve been reading your file,’ he said. ‘It’s interesting, very interesting; you are somehow different, not displaying any of the usual symptoms, and I just cannot put a label on your condition. However, I have no doubt but that we shall crack the problem after a few consultations.’

Over the next five years, he experimented with all the medication in the book, on one occasion nearly killing me with a mis-prescribed and semi-lethal concoction, not to mention a miscellany of other treatments, one of which was quite shocking, plus trips to various corners of the globe for second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth opinions.

Well, I got worse but he, poor chap, got worser (if you’ll pardon my excursion into Alice-in-Wonderland English). Apparently, I was the first failure in his entire career and this

was more than he could endure, for he was very eminent. One morning, in a voice shaking with emotion, he informed me, apologetically, that he really had to concentrate on all his other patients who weren't half as bad as me. I said how sorry I was for him, and patted him understandingly on the shoulder. He thanked me for the tremendous amount of knowledge he had acquired during the many hours he had spent with me, and told me that he was referring me to a psychologist.

I really didn't think there was much point but it was a challenge, and I have never been able to say no to a challenge, so I went.

'All is not well,' I began, explaining, in response to his gesture, that the couch was really not my thing.

'I've been reading your file,' he said. 'It's interesting, very interesting; you are somehow different, not displaying any of the usual symptoms, and I just cannot put a label on your condition. But leave it to me. I'll sort you out.'

Boy, what a change! This one was like a professional boxer, pummelling me with questions – provocative, disturbing, confrontational, challenging. Most entertaining, I thought. You see, I had been the school fencing champion and chairman of the debating society, so I always parried admirably, at which, no doubt a subtle part of the therapy, he continually feigned irritability. But, enjoyable or not, one can only put up with so much of that kind of thing, so I decided to turn the tables. As things developed, I became a devastatingly good questioner, exposing all the cracks in his plaster.

Well, I was getting worse, but even the most casual observer could tell you that he was completely in bits. One day, he grabbed my arm: 'I say,' he bleated brokenly, 'I'm not ungrateful for all that I have learned from my many meetings with you, but I just can't take any more.' He went on to explain that he needed to reorganise his mental faculties in order to cater for those who weren't half as bad as me. I could thoroughly understand, I told him and exhorted him to keep up the good work. In parting, I noticed a sort of hunted look

in his eyes, and he mentioned that he was referring me to a psychotherapist.

I was a little hesitant. Well, wouldn't you be? 'Psychotherapist' is such a long, forbidding word. But it was a new horizon and I simply adore new horizons; then there was the reality that I was in an even worse mess than ever, and the fact that God loves a trier, so I went.

'All is not well,' I said. She (for it was a she this time) was about to motion me to the couch, when I raised my hand. She quickly comprehended my meaning and pulled up a chair on the same side of the desk as me. This is intimate, I thought; I wonder what her angle is.

'I've been reading your file,' she said. 'It's interesting, very interesting; you are somehow different, not displaying any of the usual symptoms, and I just cannot put a label on your condition. But you and I will work together and get to the bottom of it, won't we?' She smiled winningly at me and I smiled winningly back. Affable to the core, that's me.

'Talk to me,' the female guru invited. She wasn't clairvoyant as far as I know, so was unprepared for my response. See, I'm good at talking – can be pretty lucid and articulate when I put my mind to it. So I did, non-stop, for about an hour and a half as a matter of fact. When I had terminated my presentation, she sort of gaped at me, yes, 'gaped' is the word; speechless into the bargain. I knew immediately what was amiss, for my painful experiences had not been without their positive side; I had discovered much of value en route. Not alone had I given a brilliant account of my situation in all its facets, but also a comprehensive, learned and professional analysis of my findings – and that was her job.

'I can see,' she muttered, clearing her throat in embarrassment, 'that this is going to need an innovative approach.'

Now, I'm no artist but, over the next few years, she had me indulging in a variety of artistic endeavours which I presented to her at successive appointments. For reasons that were beyond me, she could never quite bring herself to tell me what the objective of all this was, but, on the basis of my

growing command of the various skills employed by purveyors of psychological services, I concluded that the draw, paint and montage strategy was designed to get surreptitiously in touch with the real, inner me. The trouble was that each time I showed her my handiwork, she was supposed to apprise me of what Jung, Freud and others would have made of it all. Always, however, before she could get that far, and with absolutely no malicious intent on my part, I was quick to point out that Exhibit A represented this emotion, Exhibit B was indisputable evidence of that personality trait, and Exhibit C was a clear manifestation of some other characteristic. I mean to say, it was all crystal clear to me and, as I repeatedly pointed out to her, none of this was telling me anything about myself with which I was not already fully *au fait* or, if you prefer, thoroughly versed.

At one point, presumably in exasperation, she experimented with an alternative technique, and had me travelling back to very early childhood, with a side-trip to the maternal womb. Fascinating, absolutely fascinating. I recalled all sorts of strange and macabre experiences, which elicited from her an assortment of outlandish explanations – experiences which had never before come to my conscious memory, and all of which, I realised with hindsight several years later, had one interesting thing in common: they never occurred in the first place.

We never had a full session. I generally wound things up at about half-time, always leaving her struggling to justify her substantial fee. In retrospect, I suppose the reason I kept it up for so long was that I found the whole process rather enjoyable and my skill as an artist was developing apace. But decision day had to come sooner or later. You see, I was getting worse but she was declining alarmingly. Eventually, in tears, she told me that she was taking a year's leave of absence during which she proposed to undergo psychotherapy herself, and then take a refresher course to enable her to deal, once again, with cases that weren't half as bad as mine. I handed her the tissues and sympathised profusely, pleading with her to take care of herself. She muttered something about being

grateful for all that I had taught her, and said that I really ought to consider one of those self-help groups.

Why not? I asked myself. What have I got to lose? I questioned. Nothing at all, came the internal response, and anyway I'm gregarious by nature, so I went.

It was, however, with some trepidation that I attended my first meeting. Professionals with antique desks and a string of letters after their names I could handle with aplomb, but a room full of people carrying a similar cross to myself – now that was an entirely different kettle of fish, if that's an appropriate metaphor. But I had no need to fear; they were wonderful, male and female, young and old alike. I had never met more sincere and helpful people in one place, at one time, in all my life. Nevertheless, I found it hard to settle down and, while I contributed meaningfully at many meetings, sorting out several of my new-found friends in the process, it was some time before I finally plucked up the courage to tell my own lengthy story. Tell it, however, I eventually did, and when I had terminated my narration, which incidentally commenced with 'All is not well,' there was a stunned silence. The leader of that night's meeting finally found voice, and while, naturally, the assembled gathering hadn't seen my file, what he had to say, had a certain ring of *déjà vu* about it.

'That was interesting, very interesting; you are somehow different, not displaying any of the usual symptoms, and we just cannot put a label on your condition. You are of course more than welcome to stay with us, for we have all learned so much from our acquaintance with you, and we enjoy your company immensely, but perhaps you would derive more benefit for yourself by consulting a qualified counsellor.'

I was getting a bit cheesed off at this stage, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to try anything else, but I am basically a stoic at heart, and I didn't want to hurt their feelings, so I had my file forwarded from the psychotherapist's office (she was still on leave of absence) to a suitable practitioner, and went ...

... Well, not immediately, for he was on an extended vacation, so I kept myself occupied, to keep me off the streets if nothing else, by going on one of those intense group

therapy weekends, recommended, I might add, by a fellow sufferer who should have known better. We foregathered in the melodramatic presence of an overwrought, female, twangy-accented facilitator, and proceeded to unveil, to perfect strangers, our innermost secrets including, in my case, the fact that all was not well. ‘Facilitator’, incidentally, is one of those words which you should never, if you wish to maintain your dignity, attempt to enunciate after the fifth gin and tonic.

We sat in an intimate little circle on the floor, cross-legged, yoga-style; not exactly what the doctor ordered for my arthritis but I didn’t want to be a spoilsport. This getting-down-to-basics-on-the-floor stuff, it appears, is an essential part of the therapy, some drivel about breaking down the barriers. The transatlantic bird clucked around us like a mother hen, encouraging free expression, regression to childhood and similar trash. You know the sort of thing: role-playing with the pretty young co-participant who just happened to be squatting next to me. The poor unsuspecting girl was directed to become the wicked ugly stepmother of my childhood – the source of all the emotional garbage that I am still carrying, even though my stepmother was a perfect lady and loved me dearly – and you tell the pretty young co-participant, alias my stepmother, what you think of her using a colourful selection of well-chosen four-letter words, somewhat reminiscent of the vocabulary of a New York longshoreman on a bad day. This is followed by an invigorating session of beating the stuffing out of innocent cushions in the interests of granting an exit visa to your repressed anger. Everybody then hugs you, platonically of course, and tells you what wonderful work you’re doing on yourself, and more crap of that ilk.

I tried to get into the spirit of the thing, but the whole charade reminded me of a third-rate performance by dyslexic, drama school dropouts, directed by a garrulous, neurotic junkie. So, as you will understand, I found it hard to participate with any degree of enthusiasm. The one moment of sanity occurred just before the weekend drew to a close.

The facilitator, to my surprise, said how much she had benefited from my profound sharings. She also mentioned in passing that, while she hadn't seen my file, I was somehow different, not displaying any of the usual symptoms, that I was very interesting and all that stuff, and she hadn't a clue how to put a label on my condition. She prattled on – something about an offer to become a facilitator, but I didn't hear because I was much too preoccupied with my joints, all of which had now seized up from hours of inertia on the floor, and equally preoccupied with the talented ministrations of the pretty young co-participant who had just happened to be squatting next to me and who was now in the process of massaging them. This, I hasten to add, was all completely above board because she was a physiotherapist. At least, that's what she told me. Anyway, we eventually bid our adieux, and I had to look around for a way to occupy the intervening time, since these theatricals had filled only one weekend.

I was walking down the high street on my way home, when I spotted a poster in a health shop claiming all sorts of wonderful results from herbal remedies, together with reiki or shiatsu or shen therapy or ... I can't quite remember – one of those alternative what-you-may-call-its anyway. Well, you probably have some insight into my character by now. Can't resist something new. So I went.

The herbalist looked about ninety-five, and therefore was obviously very experienced. She was kindly and understanding, and when I gave her as concise a summary of my file as I could, she told me that it was very interesting and I was different, and – well, you know the script – but she was sure that herbs would help, together with the massage or whatever it was. She had obviously studied psychology because, while asking me detailed questions about my condition to enable her to come up with the correct formulation, she suddenly lapsed into complete silence. By now, as you can imagine, I had become very familiar with this technique, as with many others. Therapists are told, during their training, that people don't like silence and will soon break it and say something of extreme importance to the

diagnosis. She couldn't have known, of course, but I absolutely love silence. Give me the quiet life any day. So after twenty minutes of blissful tranquillity, during which I sat there dreamily, eyes closed, she coughed, apparently in some discomfiture, and asked if I would like a cup of tea.

She then introduced me to the therapist bloke. Sydney was his name. He was a former all-in wrestler; the punters used to call him 'Smasher Syd' I understand. He was about twenty stone, seven feet tall, with muscles bulging where I never knew there were muscles, and had the face and manner of a disgruntled warthog. I declined the massage on the grounds of a painful skin ailment which I had contracted on the spur of the moment. The dear lady assured me that, although this was an unfortunate setback, much could be achieved by herbs alone. All natural, she told me, and nothing to worry about. So I started taking the mixture she prepared for me, which contained ... Look, I'm sure you don't want all the boring details, just the nitty-gritty: I had an acute allergic reaction to the seed and weed concoction and spent six weeks in hospital. In theory, it should have given me time to deliberate and regroup, but I was so sick that I couldn't bloody well think straight.

Incidentally, did I tell you that I attended a hypnotherapist at some point on my journey? I didn't? Oh, must have forgotten. A friend suggested it, and assured me that it had nothing to do with the bizarre antics one sees in stage shows and on the television. As you will readily grasp from the story so far, there are certain things that I haven't tried before which are a kind of fatal attraction for me, and this was one of them. So I selected what seemed to be a reputable practitioner and, as on so many occasions in the past, I went. This time I agreed to lay on the couch; it works better that way I'm told. In a deep trance, during which I was one hundred per cent awake and aware, I unearthed things in a remote recess of my psyche that I deeply needed, upon which she informed me that I shouldn't need them and presumptuously foisted her 'expert' opinion on me instead. This took the wind out of my sails, but for only a few seconds.

I quickly recovered my equilibrium, hopped off the couch and, in no uncertain manner, told her to ... but no! I haven't used bad language thus far in my account of the saga, so I won't start now. Drawing on the time-honoured lexicon of colourful expletives, you will have no difficulty in guessing. While I was making a beeline for the door, I suggested to her that she would be doing the public a signal service if she were to stick her hypnotherapy where the elephant puts its toothbrush. And that was that.

By the time I was nearing the end of my pilgrimage, the internet had become mainstream (if that's the word I'm looking for) and, like so many other misguided souls, especially ones like me who just can't resist something new, I rummaged around it a good deal, hopeful of a newfangled solution. I should have had more sense, but – surprise, surprise! – I was getting worse, and it was a case of any port in a storm. I found a number of self-help 'webinars' and online programmes which looked promising. The reason they looked promising is that they all used seductively extravagant language – like 'transformational', 'life-changing', even 'miraculous' – and promised the Earth. All the ones I came across appear to have originated on a large, well-known landmass where the prevalence of this kind of online therapy amounts virtually to an epidemic, which must be pretty worrying for the inhabitants. Being desperate, though, I tried a couple. I'll tell you about just one.

The first setback was that, when I registered, they didn't want to see my file and tell me how interesting it was and the other stuff to which I had become accustomed. As you will understand, I had become rather proud of my file by this time, but all they wanted was my first name, email address and five hundred of the hard-earned. I followed the first two sessions, which told me how wonderful their particular scheme was and gave me a pep talk on having a positive attitude. Whereupon I got a severe dose of the flu which knocked me off my perch for the guts of two weeks. When I got back to my computer – or device as they like to call it nowadays – I found that I had forgotten the bloody password. I tried 'Allisnotwell' since that

was the most likely, but nothing doing. So they sent me a link to reset it, and when I got up and running again, the rest of the stuff on offer turned out to be a mixed bag of high-sounding but vacuous formulas, peppered with the same extravagant language, the ensemble making me distinctly inclined to throw up. I would like to have made visual contact with the self-appointed gurus who presided over the charade in order to give them a piece of my mind, accompanied by appropriate body language, but that wasn't possible. Instead, I changed my password to 'Whataloadofrubbish' as a sort of symbolic fingers up sign. It was buried somewhere deep in their software, of course, so they couldn't have noticed, but it sure did *me* good; actually, that was the best part of the whole experience. I unsubscribed a few days later, wrote the five hundred smackers off to experience, and that was the end of that absurdity, leaving me with a fervent wish that they'd bury themselves somewhere deep in their software, and saddled with a residual viewpoint which may be summarised more or less as follows: Internet be damned and webinars my arse!

Just for the record, I should mention that I tried a number of other conceptions – some curious, some cockeyed – in my quest for an antidote to the vicissitudes of the human condition. However, I won't give a blow-by-blow account as I have no desire to test my readers' patience; there is enough here already to give a pretty comprehensive picture of my pilgrimage. Suffice it to say that they were all about as helpful as taking laxatives for an ingrown toenail. Actually, some of them did induce a laxative effect, metaphorically speaking, but that is neither here nor there. The problem was that none of the people I consulted along the way could get a grip on ... I mean, they just could not get their head around my ... Put it this way: have you ever tried explaining toothache to a jellyfish?

As an aside, I was expressing the view earlier that God loves a trier. If so, he's absolutely crazy about me.

Anyway, thankfully I recovered from the herbal fiasco and, in due course, and to cut a long story short, the counsellor returned to base and I, as had been envisaged, went.

‘All is not well,’ I said, shaking the hand which he proffered, for he had come to the door to greet me. He didn’t have a couch, so I slumped somewhat listlessly (for I now had little hope that anybody could help a case as bad as mine) into what I later discovered was *his* reclining office chair. It felt good. ‘I’ve always wanted one of these,’ I mused, closing my eyes, allowing the luxurious leather to mould itself around my body and induce dreams of being fanned by gentle zephyrs and fed grapes by nubile maidens in a tropical island paradise.

Regrettably he interrupted my reverie, addressing me from the chair usually reserved for his clients.

‘I’ve been reading your file,’ he said (my file, I should mention, now took up an entire filing cabinet). ‘It’s interesting, very interesting; you are somehow different, not displaying any of the usual symptoms, and I just cannot put a label on your condition. As a matter of fact,’ he went on, ‘I have absolutely no desire to.’

I sat up abruptly, and gave him my undivided attention. This was a distinctly new approach. Perplexingly, to me at any rate, he was looking at me deferentially – with something bordering on reverence actually.

‘I am privileged,’ he proceeded, ‘to meet somebody with such a wealth and depth of experience. Your reputation precedes you; I’ve never come across anything like it. Apart from the information in your file, I can see, even by looking at you, that you are brilliant, fascinating and brimming over with cosmic wisdom.’

‘Yes, I know,’ I acknowledged modestly. (Boastfulness, you understand, has always been one of my pet hates but, with equal fervour, I detest false humility.)

He went on to emphasise that he had worked with many erudite, intelligent and gifted people in his years of study, research and practice, but none of them were half as good as me.

‘I um ... that is, I mean to say ...’ he continued hesitantly. ‘I don’t know quite how to put this, but, er ... well ... I am extremely distressed, highly depressed, I’m coming apart at the seams, and I just cannot go on. Is there any possibility that ...’

if it's not asking too much... could you, would you ... counsel me?'

'Delighted,' I said and had him sorted out by the end of that very session. As it turned out, his was a fairly straightforward case. A new man, he literally grovelled in gratitude, asking how much he owed me, telling me indeed to name my price.

'Not at all,' I said, waving my hand magnanimously. 'Only too glad to be of assistance to a member of the hallowed profession.' I bid him *au revoir* and sallied jauntily forth, tossing an airy parting salutation at the receptionist. She goggled at me disbelievingly; I was the first person in her long career to pass her desk in the direction of the exit without producing a chequebook.

I became aware, with contentment of the deepest, that I had terminated my last, my very last consultation, that is at the receiving end. The distinct possibility of entering the field professionally could be considered at my leisure. It was quite obvious that the demand for my services would be quite phenomenal. The number of practitioners out there who, despite their best efforts, are falling off their perches is increasing exponentially. It would be one way, I reflected, of recovering the vast sums I had laid out to finance my voyage of discovery.

Anyway, at that moment of triumph, I did the only thing that a man in his right mind, especially one with my exuberant personality, could do on realising that he had just issued forth into the light at the end of the tunnel. I adjourned to a high-class restaurant in the neighbourhood and ordered a dozen oysters, a large portion of prime beef from the trolley, medium-rare (the beef, not the trolley), to be followed by Tiramisu, accompanied by a litre bottle of San Pellegrino, the renowned sparkling refresher. I wanted to consider, with a clear mind, my new-found liberation from what I have come to call the 'Twilight zone of the mind-boggling', so I eschewed anything stronger.

I appreciate that my reader will have difficulty in believing that I contrived to warble a well-known ditty by the pop group

Survivor, flick my fingers like castanets, execute a sort of pirouette, and drink one of Italy's finest table waters all at the same time – much to the amusement and/or consternation of my fellow diners. This seemingly unachievable performance was rendered possible, however, through the effect produced on me by the sudden and overwhelming awareness that, after thirty-three years, seven hundred and sixty-nine consultations, fifty-seven self-help meetings, plus all the other stuff, incurring in the process an expenditure sufficient to raise the *Titanic*, then pay off my four adult children's mortgages with the change, I had finally put a label on my condition: Normality.

'I am perfectly normal,' I murmured to myself, taking another satisfying sip, 'and they, with the exception of my good friends in the self-help group, are all totally screwed up.'

I smiled inwardly as I champed thoughtfully on a mouthful of dry-roasted peanuts, joyfully contemplating the forthcoming feast, and mentally surveying the devastated battlefield from which I had just emerged, victorious.

'In a nutshell,' I observed to the waiter who at that moment arrived with the oysters, and hadn't a clue what I was talking about, 'all is well!'

(*'In A Nutshell'*, story in *Oh, My Head!*)

Humility is a wonderful quality

'I am privileged,' he proceeded, 'to meet somebody with such a wealth and depth of experience. Your reputation precedes you; I've never come across anything like it. Apart from the information in your file, I can see, even by looking at you, that you are brilliant, fascinating and brimming over with cosmic wisdom.'

'Yes, I know,' I acknowledged modestly. (Boastfulness, you understand, has always been one of my pet hates but, with equal fervour, I detest false humility.)

PART THREE

More Pieces of Mind

Dubious accolade!

Incidentally, it strikes me that, the way things are going, I could, in the fullness of time, become one of the world's most prolific, unpublished authors!

688 **For my wife on our 25th wedding anniversary**

You have shared each onward step,
When firm and when I faltered,
Through night, till morn,
Each new day born,
Through desert, vale and meadow,
In sunlight and in shadow,
On Nature's charted course.
You've seen the many things I've seen,
Been the many wheres I've been ...
Though, thankfully, not all;
And when you saw me fall,
Enheartened where you could,
If not always understood:
An unconditional love
That I could never earn,
But a love that I return
Today, for just the day,
Tomorrow when it dawns,
And each moment of forever.

(‘Silver’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

689 **There is a place of great beauty within each person**

Yet I cannot bring you with me;
I can only go alone
To the realm of which I speak.
But, fear not – you'll find your own,
For each person is unique,
And a wondrous realm is waiting
That only you may access,
And you will not be excluded
From the Love that's all embracing,
From the gift that's been your birthright
Since the cradle of eternity,
Far beyond both time and space.
Then, take heart.

(From ‘Wistful I Would Wish’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

690 **Past, present, future – and timelessness**

These thoughts are by no means original, but I don't believe I have expressed them before.

We can never get to the future. When tomorrow arrives, it will be today. The past does exist, but, until we may arrive at a different perspective, it exists only in our memories. However, the gems of wisdom and the hurt from the past are part of the present, and in that sense they are more than just memories. They are integral to our palpable experience in the present and can have significant influence, either positive or negative.

So, in a real sense, there is only now. I am not coming from the standpoint of mindfulness, currently enjoying considerable popularity, which focuses on being in the present moment as much as possible. Rather am I suggesting that, from a more cosmic vantage point, past, present and future fusing into one in this way gives me a slender hint of the timelessness of eternal life, which hitherto seemed impossible to understand.

I am blessed to have other, beautiful experiences of timelessness that I cannot put into words, but what is offered here is a way to a partial understanding by rational means.

To finish on a light-hearted note, I saw this fridge magnet recently: *Today is the tomorrow I was worried about yesterday!*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

691 **I'm not judgemental but ...**

'I know I'm no expert, Lucille,' I said, as the reading concluded, 'but if that was a poem, I'm an astronaut. I didn't understand a single word of it. I mean to say, why is it that some of these early twentieth-century bods throw up stuff for general consumption that would take a hieroglyphics expert to decipher, and then only with the concerted assistance of my mother-in-law (she is brilliant at cryptic crosswords, I hasten to add by way of clarification)? I don't know why they just can't call a spade a spade.'

(From 'Faux Pas', story in *Life With Lucille*)

692 **The condition of conditioning**

I quite often speak of my ‘conditioning’, particularly when referring to my spiritual education. It’s interesting that conditioning has the same root as ‘condition’. It is even more interesting to note that the original meaning was ‘a formula of agreement between two persons’. However, it has come into modern English as ‘a requirement imposed on one person by another’. Thus when I was conditioned, people imposed conditions on me. The bizarre paradox is that I was told by the conditioners that God’s love is unconditional. They then spent the next five decades telling me what all the conditions were! Painful stuff.

I have gratitude beyond my ability to express that the God I now know loves me *unconditionally* in the absolute sense of that word.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

693 **Do fairies swim?**

‘Do you know something, I think I might give this swimming lark a try. It seems to do you no end of good.’

‘Do fairies swim?’

‘Water nymphs do; my lot never have, but there’s always a first time. I just go down these steps and throw myself in, right?’

‘Jasmine, is this wise? If your lot never swim, maybe there’s good reason ... Jasmine!’ Too late. She scurried down the steps and dived into the water.

‘Gosh, this is lovely. Wish I’d discovered it years ago. Now for the high diving board. Watch me; I’ll just fly down slowly and do a swan-type landing on the water.’

I protested, but to no avail. I looked up at the diving tower just in time to see my little fairy friend do a spectacular belly flop from the top board.

‘Jasmine, are you all right?’ I ran to the edge of the water, just as she was crawling out on all fours.

‘My bloody wings are waterlogged. I can’t fly.’

(From ‘In The Swim’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

694 **True wealth**

You mentioned the tremendous temptation to re-enter your old life – the international jet-set one. I cannot, of course, comment on your experience of that life, but I can tell you about mine, such as it was. At one period, I was wealthy – until the company went into liquidation and I lost everything. I had many friends, travelled frequently and experienced much of the life of which you speak. And what of my jet-set friends when the business folded? They disappeared faster than ice cubes on a hot griddle. More than that, when I was able to distance myself from that life, I came to see it for what it was (mostly that is; there was certainly some good): temporarily pleasurable, but rather shallow and lacking true purpose. Later, I was blessed to make friends who stick by me through thick and thin, and I found a true purpose. Was that life as good as you remember? Or is it euphoric recall? And if you go back to it, will you just have fun, or will you discover that it is empty and cannot sustain you? I'll stick my neck out here: whatever misery you are experiencing now, go back there ... and today's burdens will seem like a tea party in comparison. Here's another thought: whether we like it or not, whether we are happy or unhappy, we have moved on, and there is nowhere to go back to.

The bottom line for me is this: I have much less money and material possessions than I did back then, and there has been a lot of pain in my life since that time. But I have *never* been so wealthy.

(From a letter, August 2015)

695 **Meeting celebrities**

Even in youth, I don't recall being particularly excited at the idea of meeting celebrities. Now I regard them as just human beings like myself, and my enjoyment of other people's company, whether prince or pauper, depends on who they are in and of themselves, rather than on what they are, what they have achieved or what they possess.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

696 **Where does the yearning for God come from?**

It is not the intellect that yearns for God, it is the spirit, but if one does not believe in the existence of the spiritual, then it may readily be understood why God will be held to be a figment of the imagination born of an intellectual yearning. This is a reasonable conclusion, but only if one deems the intellect to be the sole arbiter of reality. However, whereas I can prove conclusively to others that two and two make four if they do not believe it, proof in the spiritual realm is only available to the person to whom it is revealed deep inside him/herself. Each person must find his/her own proof born of his/her own unique experience of God. The great pity is that so few seem to, but that could be a grossly incorrect perception.

To put it another way, the argument that a yearning for 'God' is merely a logical outgrowth of the developed intellect is very plausible until one has incontrovertible, personal proof of a realm beyond the intellect. When this is received, the intellect ceases to be the arbiter of that which is real and not real, of that which exists and does not exist. In short, the finiteness and the capacity for doubt and scepticism of the intellect – its very pronounced limitations, therefore – are clearly exposed. However, these limitations are only made obvious to souls on an individual basis and spiritual discoveries, of their nature, may not be exposed to the general view, since the realm of the spirit is discovered deep within each person and is mostly only available to and observable by that person. That is why I say that each person must find his/her own proof and also why it is not wise to share one's precious inner jewels with others except in a general way. The great pity is that, in my (hopefully erroneous) perception, so few seem to. They are missing out on by far the greatest treasure a human being can possess. But, on consideration, I believe that there are countless millions out there who have found the truth, but, like me and for the same reasons as me, talk about it only very selectively.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

697 **A type of poor listener**

... and finally, the most dangerous listener of the lot: The Mr/Ms 'Fix-it' listener. As soon as they think they understand what the speaker's problem is, they assume they know the solution and proceed to 'fix' him or her without being asked. In most cases, the speaker is well able to fix him/herself, and either becomes resentful at the listener's interference or else becomes overly dependent on the listener, which is an unhealthy situation for both parties.

(From 'Listening' in *Communications – A Course Manual*)

698 **I am not what I seem**

I am host to many and various:
A prestigious education in my intellect,
A strict code of discipline in my training
A respected occupation on my CV,
A traditional religious ethos in my conditioning,
A standard western diet in my body,
A conservative bias in my daily comportment,
Superficial order in all my affairs,
And a veneer of harmony on my façade.

As if all that wasn't enough
To fill the available accommodation,
And belying the relatively unruffled exterior,
There are radical philosophies in my belief system,
A ridiculous sense of humour in my relief system,
A rebel at the core of my being,
Chaos in my inner meanderings,
Bewildering, kaleidoscopic variations in my emotions,
Deep romantic whirlpools in my heart,
A wandering minstrel in my fantasies,
An extraterrestrial yearning in my soul,
And a timeless destiny in my spirit.

All in all,
I am not what I seem.

(‘Residents’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

699 **How loved I am**

Deep within me, the essence of me, I am loved beyond measure, I am cherished, I am honoured, I am held safe in a timeless embrace. There is no condemnation, no demand, no command, only unconditional love and gentleness.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

700 **Fred puts me in my place**

... It struck me that we had been driving for some time without a break. 'There's a lay-by just up the road with a wood nearby, Fred. Let's pull in, take a walk in the sylvan surroundings and imbibe some fresh air before continuing our journey.'

'I wouldn't advise it, old son, unless you've got a disguise in the boot,' said Fred, still laughing.

'Why ever not?' I asked, puzzled, indeed somewhat annoyed by this excessive display of merriment which was way beyond the humour of the occasion.

'Because,' Fred positively chortled, 'today's the day the teddy bears have their picnic,' at which point he positively collapsed in a paroxysm of mirth.

This was way over the top. It was high time Fred grew up I felt, though there was little hope of that. I struggled to hold on to my diminishing supply of patience and searched for a telling phrase that would put him in his place. I am pleased to report that my efforts bore fruit: 'Bless the poor child,' I muttered charitably and in a pointedly patronising tone, 'he's easily amused!'

Fred's laughter ceased abruptly.

'Yes, thank God; I am easily amused, which is more than can be said for you, you sour-faced old gloomyboots! Here am I doing psychic somersaults in an attempt to cheer you up, succeeding – it appears – for a while; yet the best you can do is wind up the proceedings with a dollop of ill-timed sarcasm born of your morbid solemnity. I thought you liked bears. Ungrateful wretch!'

(From 'Child's Play', story in *Life With Fred*)

701 **Is Lucille all mine?**

I wasn't sure whether I should ask; I wasn't even sure if I wanted to find out, but eventually curiosity got the better of me, as it does on the odd occasion: 'I hope you don't mind my asking, Lucille, but I'm sort of anxious to know something. Do you do your Musing exclusively for me, or is there someone else in your life? I know you have had assignments in the past, but now I mean?'

(From 'A Question Of Loyalty', story in *Life With Lucille*)

702 **The nature of spiritual experience in the material world**

One of the flawed notions I brought from my religious conditioning was that for me to surrender myself absolutely to God's will was tantamount to giving him permission to make me suffer even more. Small wonder! I was brought up on a diet of saints and martyrs, virtually all of whom, in my conditioned perceptions, once they got closer to God, suffered more and more. Additionally, I was told to deny myself, take up my cross and follow God, together with many more, mostly joyless, exhortations.

It has taken me decades to see that everybody suffers in some measure – a significant number in great measure – but it appears that many have to do so without the consolation of knowing God's infinite, steadfast, unconditional love in an intimately personal way, if at all. In other words, suffering is endemic to the human condition; it will be there regardless of the closeness to or distance from God. To have the consolation of God's stupendous love, then, in the midst of the suffering is surely what is devoutly to be wished for.

I believe that the reason that the impression is given that the saints suffered more is that they were particularly open and honest about their lives, whereas secular society conditions us to wear the mask and say 'fine thanks' even when everything is falling apart. In short, it is well for me not to go by appearances: I never know what is going on behind somebody else's front door, or between their ears.

It occurs to me that what can create the widely believed illusion that people suffer more when they get close to God (and Thérèse of Lisieux spoke of this) is as follows: when one has experienced the amazing wonder of God's love deep inside, and then the dark days come, as they will simply as part of the human condition, the contrast is so much greater, therefore more difficult to bear. To put it in simple mathematical terms: if I go down to minus two having been at plus two, I will certainly feel despondent. However, if I go down to minus two having experienced plus twenty, the contrast is so very much greater and the resulting pain more difficult to bear.

I need to remind myself frequently that this *contrast* is what I experience, *not* greater suffering. That God asks great sacrifices of those who are close to him is one of the most seriously erroneous messages in much of the religious teaching that I have come across.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

703 **What then?**

Provoked by the unstoppable tide of technology,
More and more enterprises,
Are laying off more and more people
In order to incur less and less expenses
So as to produce more and more products,
And make more and more profit,
Which will leave less and less employed
Producing more and more goods
To satisfy less and less needs
Of more and more unemployed,
Who, more and more,
Will have less and less money
To buy them.
More products,
Less customers.
What then?

(“What Then?”, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

704 **God's love is intensely practical**

A friend recommended me to read [a particular series of spiritual books] and – on a brief review of Book One, I thought it would be my cup of tea. On further acquaintance, however, I found that it turned me off in a big way, and I not alone discontinued reading it but threw it out. And why? Because [the author's] God is a very matter-of-fact and common-sense God, a tell-it-like-it-is God for the sophisticated 'post-modern' age of the twenty-first century – an age obsessed with information (among other things). An intensely practical God in other words which – after what seems like millennia of esoteric mysticism on the one hand and do-what-we-say-but-don't-ask-why religious domination on the other – is surely what one could most wish for?

My God, on the other hand, expresses himself in a transcendently, passionately, profoundly loving way all the time. When I have a dilemma, a heartache, a tantrum, a desire or a question, or screw things up, My Beautiful One responds with tidal waves of infinite, unconditional love. Now what could be more intensely practical than that? Love is all I need.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

705 **Lucille has a problem**

'Well, you're the first writer I've worked with who uses a computer. I've managed to grasp almost all the linguistic changes in three millennia, and I could cope with the typewriters that my last two authors had, but I've watched you for the last three years working on this machine, and I've done my best to get the hang of it but, apart from the keyboard, it's got me completely foxed.'

'Lucille, treasured one, why didn't you say so before? Here was I enjoying every second of our compositions, but you weren't able to participate in the final production process. You must have felt left out, poor thing. Would you like me to explain it to you?'

'Oh, yes please, if it's not too much trouble.'

(From 'For The Teacher', story in *Life With Lucille*)

706 **There's always another way**

Under normal circumstances, Fred and I are not given to extremes of reaction to the obstacles which the human condition bungs arbitrarily in our path, but I have to concede that the going had been pretty rough in the months preceding the conversation of which I am about to render an account. We had been weathering the storm fairly well but every man has his breaking point. Fred's came at the tail end of one particularly trying day:

'I've had enough; I can't take any more, and I won't take any more,' he vociferated. 'You can say what you like, or you can say fuck all – the choice is yours – but I'm going on a monumental piss up, and to hell with the consequences.'

'Knock it off, Fred!' I returned sternly, albeit with a certain compassion. 'This is no time to give up. *Courage, mon vieux*. There is always a more prudent way out of our dilemmas if we but display a little forbearance and patience. Besides, the path on which you propose to embark is fraught with danger, akin one might say to shark-infested waters.'

(From 'Conversion', story in *Life With Fred*)

707 **Attachment to outcomes**

So much of our human thinking, bolstered by education and social conditioning, hinges on attachment to outcomes. I, for example, had a management training the primary focus of which was to predict and achieve outcomes. This can result in a marked tendency to live in the eventual outcome rather than dwell in the undertaking of the moment. So, we can largely miss out on the nurturing of now and are greatly disturbed if the outcome does not manifest as planned. God's way does, of course, include the using of the gifts he has given to us to plan sensibly for the future; that is, take courses of action that have desired outcomes, such as arranging life assurance policies to protect our loved ones ... His way, I believe, is primarily to be present to the current undertaking, as well as we are able, and leave the outcomes to him.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

708 **Does God answer prayer?**

I remember, many years ago, a priest on a television chat show saying that God answers every prayer but most of the time it's 'No.' Who wants a God like that?

I respect his right to hold that view of course but, as a pastor, to trot that kind of stuff out on national television strikes me as irresponsible. It seems to me that there is not much point in praying if the answer is mostly 'No', and a mostly-no God would be a pretty dismal, discouraging, divine companion. Moreover, if our hearts yearn to stay tuned in to the Divine, it wouldn't say much for the way he has formed and nurtured us over the years if virtually everything we asked for was selfish, ill-advised or born of false motivation. God's wisdom operating in us surely prompts us frequently to ask for what the core of our spirits discerns God wants to give, and we ask accordingly ...

My experience, I have come to realise recently, is that My God answers my *every* prayer *positively*. Sometimes (surprisingly often actually) he says 'Yes'. At other times he takes the *spirit* or the *essence* if you prefer, of my prayer and transforms it into the energy – the answer – that he knows is right for me or the person for whom I am asking. And why? Because God always wants to honour me, but he can see the entire tapestry whereas, at any given time, I can see only a few threads. Now, that's love – infinite, steadfast, unconditional love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

709 **Really living**

A voice inquires inside my head
If I will live before I'm dead;
Whene'er this question plagues my mind,
No peaceful slumber can I find.
Asleep, I dream of life eternal,
But my concern is more diurnal;
So tell me this, and tell no lie,
D'you think I'll live before I die?

(‘Quality Control’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

710 **Another world**

Gerald did not intrude with needless questions and just waited for Elizabeth to continue when she was ready. He sensed that she was about to entrust him with details that she had rarely shared with anybody.

‘It is like living in two worlds at the same time. My feet are solidly planted in this life, but the most important part of me is constantly in tune, in communion if you wish, with another existence – an eternal one – which, although completely separate, is paradoxically very close to us. Yet, sadly, most people do not perceive it. Moreover, many do not believe it exists and that is even sadder. It is a dimension that is more real than the one that surrounds us and it is stupendously beautiful – beyond my limited powers of description. The sense of what I can only call eternal presence never leaves me ...’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

711 **Dependence on God**

One cannot conceive anything so strange and so implausible that it has not already been said by one philosopher or another.

(René Descartes)

My dependence on God is not partial or relative, watered down by my humanity. My dependence on God is absolute. Unlike many human dependencies, this absolute dependency on God is one hundred per cent wholesome and healthy, and it is this which gives me the only independence that counts, and that is independence of spirit, which in turn derives from my oneness with God. And the more I become one with God, the more I become truly the unique individual that is me. All of this looks very much as if it contains several contradictions, and wouldn't even make first base in a philosophical treatise; but, in spiritual terms, it is pure logic. Besides, who needs philosophy when you've got Perfect Love permanently residing in the core of your spirit?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

712 **No comparisons please**

Provoked by well-meaning
Relatives and peers,
A question has plagued me
For years and for years:
Am I more like my father
Or more like my mother?
See, I never was blessed
With the beauty or beast
Of a sister or brother,
In this world at least,
So I was the butt
Of intense observation
(The single child's curse)
And they always compared me,
For better or worse,
Despite my impedance,
To one or the other
Of my dear antecedents.
And to my aggravation,
They still fill up gaps
In banal conversation
With absurd speculation
Of a similar ilk.
But the truth is –
Which took me a lifetime to see –
That the one that I'm most like,
And most want to be,
Is me.

(‘Homecoming’, poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

713 **A great privilege**

One of the greatest privileges in the universe is to witness a human heart being transformed by the infinite, unconditional love of God. Coming very close to that is the privilege of being a channel of that love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

714 **Some credit for Lucille please**

‘For centuries, I have vicariously created countless literary gems but never received any acknowledgement. The world of literature has revered dozens of my writers, but nobody ever knew that I was the source. I feel like a non-entity – as if I didn’t exist. Perhaps, like you on another occasion, I am having an existential crisis, wondering what it’s all about and so forth. It’s not that I am seeking after vainglory, but everybody needs recognition, now and again, just a little. Most of my writers, however, have ridden off into the sunset in a blaze of glory, leaving me in the sombre shadows of obscurity. I don’t think I’m being unreasonable. Do you?’

(From ‘Where Credit Is Due’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

715 **Fred and I return to normality – such as it is**

‘Kiss my ass and up yours!’ he retorted.

I should have been quite comfortable with this rapid return to what passes for normal diplomatic relations in our domain, but I was still taken aback at his coarseness, and I gaped at him aghast. He could, of course, have become condescending and smug all over at getting the upper hand but, thankfully, his true nature shone through. Just before he disappeared into a cluster of brain cells that I had never noticed before, he turned around and gave me a knowing wink.

(From ‘Status Quo’, story in *Life With Fred*)

716 **One day at a time**

Religions, philosophies, self-help books and twelve-step groups advocate living one day at a time. Cynics and the worldly-wise ridicule such a notion, saying that this is an absurd way to conduct one’s affairs. Of course, they are absolutely right. A twenty-four hour period is far too long; the best I can manage is to live my life one moment at a time. Often, not even that. That’s when I have to be carried.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

717 **Beware of credit cards**

You see, the thing is that the frightful plastic things are so awfully addictive. I see something, want it, can't afford it but ... I always have my credit cards. It is but the work of a moment to sign my inheritance away and then wallow in guilt until the monthly bill arrives. I have tried my utmost to combat my compulsive spending habits, even attending several meetings of Cardholders Anonymous, but to no avail.

(From 'Flexible Friends', story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

718 **Understanding God? Get sense!**

If one even gives scant consideration to the power of what is beyond us – that I choose to call God – the notion of trying to explain it with the human intellect is laughable. Take one example, considering first the following information:

I never studied chemistry or physics, and am, therefore, pretty much a babe in arms in these domains, so what follows may be lacking in preciseness, but it is accurate in principle – sufficient, that is, for my present purpose. Caesium is a soft, silvery, extremely reactive metal. It belongs to the alkali metal group and occurs as a trace element in some rocks and minerals. The point I want to make is that the caesium atom oscillates at over nine billion times per second. That wasn't a misprint: nine billion. The caesium atom's natural frequency was formally recognised as the new international unit of time in 1967: the second was defined as exactly 9,192,631,770 oscillations or cycles of the caesium atom's resonant frequency, replacing the old second that was defined in terms of the Earth's motions ... And an atomic clock using this metal is accurate to one second in thirty million years. Mind-boggling, isn't it?

Now let us assume that God can move only as fast as something he created – a very limited notion – but let us assume that. In this case, God is capable of sending a two- or three-word message to nine billion people once every second. However, we are told that even the most complex dreams happen in only a few seconds before waking, and dreams are

composed of images which could take thousands of words to describe. Using word pictures, then, God is capable of transmitting complex messages to nine billion people once per second. God, of course, as even a brief contemplation of life on Earth and the immensity of the universe will reveal, is infinitely greater than that. And we try to figure him out with the very limited human mind. Oh dear!

There are those – perhaps of down-to-earth, pragmatic, analytical or sceptical dispositions – who would regard my view of things as facile, naïve or even childish. But then, they are using a finite, human intellect to arrive at such conclusions, are they not?

Let me put it all in a clear and convincing nutshell ... Sorry; no can do, try as I might. My intellect has reached its finite limits and I have run out of language as well!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

719 **Not in the mood for writing**

‘Well, seeing that I’m back, then, perhaps you’d like to write something now? I’m full of wonderful new ideas after my break, and I’m just itching to get back to work with my favourite writer.’

‘Well, er ... come to think of it, as it were, and not to put a tooth in it, all things considered, weighing up the pros and the cons and so forth, taking it in the round, and when all is said and done ...’

‘Do you think you could get to the point, please.’

‘Well, er ... no, Lucille, I wouldn’t like to write something just now, actually.’

‘Well, so much for that poem, then,’ she said dejectedly.

‘What poem?’

‘The beautiful poem I was about to inspire.’

‘Oh gosh, I’m awfully sorry, my dear old thing, I really am. I wish I could wax enthusiastic, but the writing bug is regrettably still in absentia, and I just cannot bring myself to put pen to paper.’

(From ‘Pique Performance’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

720 **Many paths lead to one truth**

If, based on the scripture I am most familiar with, namely the Bible, I were requested to select something that is fixed, I would pick God's answer when Moses inquired what he was to tell the Israelites when asked the name of the God of their ancestors. God told him, 'I am who I am. This is what you must say to them: "The one who is called I AM has sent me to you."' (Exodus 3:13–14) This, in my view, is the most profound statement ever made, namely that God is unchanging and unchangeable. As I have indicated, this view is based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition but, from my current vantage point, it appears to be expressed in one way or another by most religious traditions. To borrow from a [Hindu] quotation which I cite again later in another context: *All forms of worship culminate in one truth – the truth which cannot be divided.* This is echoed by Teresa of Ávila when she said, *For as there are many mansions in Heaven, so there are many roads leading to them.**

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* *The Life Of St Teresa By Herself*, Penguin Classics, ISBN 0-140-44073-9, page 93.

721 **Actually, this is not what it seems!**

I have pretty acute hearing, thank goodness. Nevertheless, I could scarcely believe my ears.

'I love you,' murmured my cherished Muse, barely audibly.

The effect on me occasioned by this statement was rather like that which swallowing nitroglycerine might produce on a constipated ostrich. Of course, Lucille and I did engage in a little light-hearted teasing from time to time but, all in all, I had been certain up to now that the relationship was mutually platonic. I'm not good on dates, but Plato, I surmised, was probably one of her contemporaries, and she had doubtless learned the rules of the game directly from him. Yet, here she was openly, if quietly, declaring herself with three of the most dangerous words ever spoken.

(From 'The Less Said', story in *Life With Lucille*)

722 **Self-pity turns to compassion for starving millions**

If all the tears I've ever cried
Were counted one by one,
Not grains of sand nor blades of grass
Would see the tally done.

If all the tears I've ever cried
Were carried on the breeze
O'er hill and dale to every shore,
They'd fill the seven seas.

If all the tears I've ever cried
Could fall to earth as rain,
And animate the lifeless soil,
I'd cry them all again.

(‘Compassion’, poem in *The Voice Of The Man-child*)

723 **Don't stay stuck in the negative**

I know that there have been times in your life that have not been easy. When we are in pain ourselves, we can miss a simple fact: nobody finds life easy. Life just happens, and most of it, contrary to popular belief, we cannot control. What we can control is our attitude to it. There are two main ones: we can adopt what is known as the ‘victim’ role, blaming others for our troubles, being filled with self-pity, anger and resentments. The best definition of a resentment I have heard is: *Taking poison and hoping somebody else will die!* The other attitude goes something like this: *Everybody has difficulties at some stage of their life, and I am no exception. Now, let's put all that behind me as best I can, and see how I can embrace life fully so that, as well as the difficulties, I may experience the happiness and joy that comes from being free from self-pity, blaming and resentments.* We are not sentenced to staying stuck in the negative stuff, although too many people, sadly, don't seem to know that. The good news is that we have choice ... Choose to embrace life in all its fullness and not be stuck in the negative. An important part of this positive attitude it to be willing to help our fellow travellers where we can.

(From a letter, January 2013)

724 **Favourite Bible stories – and a plan for living**

Whether one regards the Bible as inerrant scripture or simply a book containing valuable lessons, there is some really good stuff in it. I have a few favourite Bible stories. Here are two of them.

The first can be found in Matthew 22:34–40. The Pharisees were obsessed with the law and believed that strict observance of the law and the teachings of the prophets made one sanctified and acceptable to God. Jesus wanted to shake them out of this obsession in order to see the truth of God’s love. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were constantly asking Jesus questions in order that they might condemn him on the basis of his answers. So, one day a Pharisee, a teacher of the law, came to Jesus and asked him what was the greatest commandment. So Jesus told him: ‘Love your God with all you heart and all your soul and all your mind.’ Now the Pharisee didn’t ask Jesus what the second greatest commandment was but Jesus told him anyway: ‘And the second greatest commandment is like it: love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ This much of the story is well known. What comes to notice less often is what I consider to be the most significant part. Jesus goes straight on to say: ‘All the Law and all the Prophets depend on these two commandments.’ That certainly put the Pharisee in his box, and gave us one of the most valuable lessons in the Bible.

The second story is to be found in John 8:3–11. Once again the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus with a question. They brought to him a woman who was caught in adultery, and said to him, ‘The Law of Moses commands us to stone such a woman to death. Now what do you say?’ Jesus started to write on the ground with his finger, and did not answer, but when they persisted, he looked up and said, ‘If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’ One by one they slunk away until Jesus was left alone with the woman. ‘Where are they? Has no one condemned you, woman?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she answered. ‘Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.’ This story teaches me that God loves me unconditionally and does not

condemn me, and also, importantly, that I am not in a position to judge *anybody*.

So, the plan for living is clear: love ourselves in a healthy, wholesome and life-giving way and only *then* love others in a similar manner. Looking at Jesus' life, it is clear that he looked after himself very well, then reached out to thousands. Regrettably, this teaching has become seriously warped over the centuries, and has come through as putting everybody else first and not counting the cost. That is a recipe for ill health and despair.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

725 **Moving beyond grief**

There's a lovely German adjective – *erholsam* – which is not easily translatable. It is usually rendered as 'restful' or 'refreshing', but the core meaning of the word would be 'that which brings one back to wholeness'. So our real wish is that you had an *erholsam* holiday, that the time to come will continue the process, and that, while nothing can take the place of your wife, you will know many moments of the sublime peace which only God can give.

(From a letter, February 2002)

726 **Fred is proud of me – sometimes**

'I recall an occasion, not too long since, which caused me to be enormously proud of you ...'

'You, proud of me, Fred; well I never ...'

'Shut up and listen! Yes, proud, as I say. You were party to the assembled forum at your place of employment, and one of those whom some blithering idiots had endowed with authority was pontificating to a frightful degree, as is his wont, causing chagrin to your colleagues and particular pain to the newly appointed who was making a presentation to the meeting. You couldn't stomach it, and wouldn't, paused for but a moment and then told him that his diatribe was, if I may quote, "a heap of shit". Wonderful, great stuff!'

(From 'Tongue In Cheek', story in *Life With Fred*)

727 **What is true reality?**

Take, for example, the way in which almost all the mass communications media seem to be obsessed with creating illusions. Buy this perfume/aftershave and get the man/woman of your dreams; drive this car and you've arrived; live in one of these homes and people will know you are somebody; travel to this holiday paradise and you are in the trend; read this book or watch this video and you will know how to – well, take your choice – everything from winning friends and influencing people to curing lumbago, and from having mind-blowing sex to finding inner peace. But it's not alone the advertising that creates illusion. I find that, although there have never been more methods of mass communication available to us, and – so we are told – never more freedom of the press, it is increasingly difficult to get the truth, the facts, about almost anything. More and more, what one gets is somebody's spin on the facts. It would be much more honest if the 'newspapers' and television 'news' channels labelled themselves 'comment' papers or 'opinion' channels.

(From 'Reality And Illusion', essay in
Reality And Illusion & Other Essays)

728 **Self-pity and compassion**

Self-pity and compassion are poles apart. Self-pity is wallowing in the 'poor me's' and is destructive. Compassion for myself, on the other hand, is a relatively accurate, almost detached, gut-level understanding of my own story. It has two functions: a) to help me place the difficulties in proper context with the other aspects of my life, and b) to give me compassion for others who experience similar pain.

Where I have to be vigilant, however, is that focusing too much on compassion for myself can lead to self-pity, and too much compassion for others can have me unhealthily soaking up their pain. With compassion, as with all other aspects of my being, I need God to give me appropriate boundaries.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

729 **Be wary of expectations – and I need patience!**

‘Who knows, fellow traveller: they say it’s a long road that has no turning. Perhaps we’ve come to ours at last.’

‘Perhaps,’ conceded Fred, ‘but don’t build up your hopes yet. High expectations have their pluses and minuses – minuses mostly. So be wary, prudent and cautious. Patience is of the essence right now.’

This touched a very sore spot indeed, an open wound you might say.

‘Fred, I’m fucking sick of being patient, and lest there should be any doubt about it, I’m pissed off with hanging about the place with great, but unfulfilled, aspirations. If I wait patiently for long enough, I’ll be bloody well dead by the time I’ve got my act together!’

(From ‘Where There’s Life ...’, story in *Life With Fred*)

730 **There is another way**

The tradition in which I grew up placed paramount emphasis on having faith. While I accept the need for faith at particular times in one’s life, the way in which faith has relentlessly been presented or, more appropriately, misrepresented to me, has caused me an enormous amount of heartache. Never, to my recollection, was more than a fleeting reference made to God’s faithfulness, much less the potential to *know* God as opposed to believing in him. Thankfully, there is another way.

(Adapted from the Introduction to *A Light In The Dark*)

731 **Human love, divine love**

Two of the major differences between a human love affair and a love affair with God are:

- ✧ The love affair with God is permanent not transitory.
- ✧ A lover is jealous if another puts an eye on the human loved one, but he/she who is truly in love with God wants the whole world to love and be loved by him with the same intensity.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

732 **A charmed life?**

The picture I have painted [in this book and in much of my other writings] could give the impression that I have a charmed life. In ways that I would find very difficult to explain, and to my continuing awe and astonishment, that is indeed the reality of my spiritual experience. And even if I were to succeed in putting it adequately into words, not many people would believe me. I say that with not a trace of elitism or exclusivity, rather with a pervasive sense of sadness, for I am convinced that this realm of which I speak is available to everybody without exception.

In my day-to-day, human experience, however, a charmed life is decidedly *not* the way it is. The first three words of M. Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Travelled*, are: 'Life is difficult.' In that one pronouncement, he certainly spoke volumes. I am just as affected by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune as anybody else. In fact, at the time of writing (late 2015), I have been finding the going pretty rough for several years, and by no means easy for decades before that. But to go through it all without that vital and precious connection, without that profound and stupendously beautiful sense of steadfast presence, is unthinkable. I am grateful beyond measure that I do not have to. I am seeing ever more clearly that this is the way in which the spiritual and the temporal harmonise to enable me to get to my ultimate destination. Over time, I have expressed this effectively mystical synergy in various ways: the pain/joy enigma, a sublime bittersweet gift, the bewildering blend of miracle and misery, and, put slightly differently, in my life the pain is the soil in which the miracles grow – and I mean miracles.* To put it all in a nutshell: I am a very blessed man.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* In the world in which we live, the word 'Miracle' is often cheapened and stripped of its original meaning through colloquial overuse. I employ it to denote extraordinary circumstances which are not explainable by any normal means.

733 **Getting one over on Fred**

‘Fred,’ I said, making no attempt to conceal the obvious distress in my tone, ‘conventional wisdom states that one can’t love two people at the same time, but I’ve just discovered, to my horror and dismay, that my lady wife is in love with two men.’

Fred gasped.

‘And that’s not all: I mean, the possibility of being doubly enslaved to the tender passion despite oneself, though one is reluctant to admit it, is just about within the bounds of that which is conceivable – an accident of fate, one might conclude; but the worst of it is that she’s actually *carrying on* with both of them.’

‘Disgraceful,’ vociferated Fred, in righteous indignation. ‘You have been betrayed by the shameless hussy, my old flesh and blood, and you certainly don’t deserve that.’

It’s nice to get a bit of sympathy now and again, I reflected, especially from Fred.

‘I imagine it is reasonable to assume,’ he continued, ‘that you, at least, are one of the recipients of her promiscuous affection. Who, then, may I ask – that is, if you know – is this other damned reprobate, this ... this lecherous usurper?’

‘You, Fred, actually.’

‘I suppose you think that’s funny,’ he snorted, and proceeded to sulk in silence.

(From ‘Two’s Company’, story in *Life With Fred*)

734 **Denial?**

Poor, fuddled fool, you remark?
Take care lest, in cosy complacence,
Gazing with condescension and derision
Upon one who built superficial life-structures
On foundations of sand,
You fail to discern that the abject figure
You are contemplating so patronisingly
Is your own reflection.

(From ‘Mirror, Mirror ...’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

735 **The way of the world**

The way of the world is to set goals and therefore anticipate outcomes. When these are not achieved, failure is the label, blame is apportioned and heads roll. I am just beginning to understand that in God's world, things are very different. The very desire that others would be touched by his love is, in and of itself, goal, action and outcome all in one. It *is*, therefore it *does* in myriad unseen ways. In other words, when such a desire is founded on the infinite love that is deep down inside me, a love that can come only from God, it has power to touch others in and of itself. Once again, I am finding language inadequate to express the reality of all this ...

A parting thought for this section comes from *Gardening The Soul** entry for 29th August:

People of goodness do not need to bestow blessings; instead, they become a blessing. Their presence is goodness and they engender new life, strength, courage and vitality by their presence.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* A book of daily reflections by Sr Stanislaus Kennedy.

736 **Self-help books**

I have read a good number of self-help books and have, at best, only received marginal help from them. In recent years, in particular, I have found them of virtually zero use ...

I began to wonder what was wrong with me when so many of my friends and acquaintances tell me, and have told me in the past, how wonderful such-and-such a book is. This morning ... however, it struck me that this is the only thing they have told me about such books, namely that they are wonderful books, great to read, sublime wisdom in them and statements of that ilk. I have *never* met anybody who has said that reading one of these books enabled them to make substantial changes in their lives. On the fly leaves or back covers of many such publications, are quotes from people who claim that 'This book changed my life'. I imagine such people exist, but I have never met one.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

737 **Boys will be boys**

Mum and I are very interested to hear that you are thinking of moving into Paris for the last month in order to ‘see everything’. Indeed, we are most impressed with your commitment to see all the monuments, art galleries and famous buildings, and your obvious desire to immerse yourself in the culture and history of the French capital. We also wonder whom you think you are kidding!

(From a letter, July 1994)

738 **Lucille has her breaking point**

‘The current organisational ethos is proving rather too much of a strain. Takes the edge off one’s performance, you know.’

‘Current organisational ethos’ repeated Lucille, with more than a hint of disapproval. ‘Pretty impoverished euphemism, if you don’t mind my saying so. I know you better than that; why don’t you tell it like it is?’

‘Well, er ... one has to be diplomatic, doesn’t one, and um ... observe the political niceties? I mean, treading on corns, however much they merit being trodden on, is hardly a laudable pursuit.’

As I have had cause to observe on more than one occasion, Lucille is gentle, elegant and refined, and always minds her Ps and Qs. But even she has her breaking point. You see, she is honest almost to a fault and cannot bear to see me beating around the bush. However, she did her best to show restraint, and started counting to ten. She only got as far as seven. ‘Oh, screw the diplomacy, a pox on the political niceties, and as far as standing on corns is concerned, get a bloody sledge hammer and do the job properly. The fact is – as you damn well know – that certain members of the hierarchy in that particular establishment have made a spectacular and monumental fuck-up of the whole operation. Trying to function happily in that environment is like trying to enjoy making love on a bed of nails. Organisational ethos, my arse!’

(From ‘Sabbatical’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

739 **How to deal with a bully**

‘That’s it! I’ve had it with his goddam dictatorial behaviour. He has, many times more than once, gone out of his way to make my life a misery, and has, what’s worse, many times more than once, bloody well succeeded. It’s way beyond high time that I gave him a substantial and trenchant piece of my mind.’

‘Quite right!’ acquiesced Fred in commendable solidarity. ‘What are you going to say to him?’

‘Oh, that’s a dead easy question to answer,’ came my ready response, ‘for I have been rehearsing my script for years, awaiting just the right moment – a moment when he is in the throes of doing his abrasive thing, at which very point my *pièce de résistance* will run more or less as follows: “Why, my dear blighted blot on the planet, do you go to such endless lengths to prove that of which everybody is already acutely aware, namely that you are a thundering and insufferable prick?” Hitherto, when in his presence, I have always balked at the first hurdle but now, pushed to the limit by his intolerable arrogance, I am unquestionably ready to do battle in no uncertain manner.’

‘That’s the spirit, and sterling stuff!’ approved Fred. ‘That is exactly what he needs to hear. It might give him a wake-up call, and you will be doing yourself and countless others a signal service by cutting him down to size. And now, at long last, you have your long-awaited, golden opportunity, for here he comes up the corridor, sporting the requisite belligerent humour.’

The thundering and insufferable prick hove alongside, accosted me with a raised index finger and proceeded to communicate some banal and inconsequential garbage, as is his wont, in a suitably uncivil and provocative manner.

‘Yes indeed,’ I said, affably. ‘Absolutely, of course, naturally, couldn’t agree more, whatever you say, delighted to kiss your ass and so forth. Have a nice day and missing you already.’

‘Quite!’ he responded and pushed quickly and thankfully off.

I breathed an enormous sigh of relief, the benefit of which was seriously diminished by the inevitable scathing comment from Fred.

‘Craven coward!’ he hissed.

(‘That’s Telling Him’, story in *Life With Fred*)

740 **One way only**

A phrase I say to God several times a day, especially when things go awry, is: ‘Your way, not mine.’ The more I think of it, the more it strikes me that I don’t really have a way. My ‘way’, when I am silly enough to give in to it, consists of blundering on from emotional crisis to emotional crisis. Scarcely a felicitous blueprint for living! This means that there is only one way: God’s way.

The one thing I have to watch constantly is the tendency to think that when I say ‘your way’ I am giving God licence to make me suffer even more. This, doubtless, comes from my conditioning and religious education which told me that people close to God suffer ... and when I am in pain ‘offer it up’ rather than ask to have it removed. The truth is that everybody suffers, in varying degrees, and many have to do so without a closeness to God. Furthermore, God often removes my pain although, in my experience, usually not according to my ‘way’ and time.

If I measure by externals, I can often (wrongly) assume that God adds to my pain and that of others; but when I look deep down inside myself, I come to know that his way for me is fashioned out of infinite, steadfast, unconditional love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

741 **Gratitude**

‘I have learned, with advancing years, my dear Lucille, to be grateful for what I am still able to do physically rather than moan about that which is now beyond my capabilities. Without appearing to give myself credit where none is due, I suppose that one might call it wisdom of a sort.’

(From ‘Hands Off!’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

742 **A teacher reflects**

I pass her on the pavement,
Now a woman of the world,
Dressed in opulence and style,
And recall, from years behind me,
She was one who sat before me
For many a studied hour,
Clad in jeans and sloppy jumper,
Like her peers in ample number,
Making careful memorandum
Of the knowledge I profess,
In her keenness to progress.
So I greet her in nostalgia
With a mentor's kindly smile
And a cordial disposition,
But she looks me in the eye
With no trace of recognition,
And her gaze then travels on
To the motley world beyond.
She knows not who I am, it seems,
Or chooses not to know,
Although, from me, she garnered
An apt repertoire of wisdom,
To escort her to success
And inspire her happiness;
For I gave her more than knowledge,
Outside all clause of contract,
Daily sharing from my journey
Through both joy and tribulation;
Oft preparing from first light
That she might learn aright.
Sigh!
How quickly they forget!

(‘Soon Forgotten’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

743 **Which is the right religion?**

I know a number of people who, for many years, searched for the ‘right’ religion (and more than one religion lays claim to that appellation), often going to great lengths in the demanding, sometimes painful, process of trial and error – error only in the sense of finding out what didn’t suit their needs. So, did any of these people find out which is the right religion? I cannot speak for them all, but some came to the same conclusion that I did: the right religion for any given person may or may not be a specific belief system; either way, it is whichever path brings one to an intimate, personal knowledge and experience of the infinite, steadfast, unconditional love of the one true God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

744 **Enough is definitely as good as a feast**

My question is this: why, in heaven’s name, can’t we be satisfied with enough? The answer is obvious of course: far too many of us are plain greedy. Amma, the inspirational Hindu mystic, spiritual luminary and humanitarian, and the person alive whom I most admire, has this to say:

Where did we go wrong? The real mistake we commit lies in our inability to differentiate between requirements and luxuries.

Coming from a different starting point, W. Somerset Maugham* puts it like this:

It is not wealth one asks for, but just enough to preserve one’s dignity, to work unhampered, to be generous, frank and independent ...

It is neither right nor wrong to have plenty. What I believe is critical is the motive for wanting it. There are inspiring examples in history of outstanding people possessed of great wealth who used vast proportions of it to help worthy causes.

(From ‘Success And Failure’, essay in *Reality And Illusion & Other Essays*)

* 1874–1965. British playwright, novelist and short story writer.

745 **Why publish?**

There are a number of sure-fire methods for getting on the wrong side of good friends. One is to borrow their favourite book and never return it. Another is to read them too much of your poetry. While having the common sense not to perpetrate the former at all and the wisdom not to indulge in the latter most of the time, I nevertheless have a hankering to make my works-of-genius/absolute drivel (according to one's perception) available to a wider audience than one – me.

(From the Introduction to *Homage To A Future Hero*)

746 **Growing up!**

... Anyway, be that as it may, I have I believe, at the half-century, finally acquired the requisite dose of humility to confess that there is really only one essential pearl of knowledge of which I can be one hundred per cent certain, namely that I know absolutely nothing. Which, now that I come to think of it, is a very great blessing. Sort of takes the pressure off me, if you know what I mean.

(From 'Knowledge', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

747 **Yearnings versus fantasy**

I have already made it clear what a yearning is for me ... It is vital that I let God decide if and when and, above all, *how* the yearning is to be met. If I allow my imagination to take flight and project how one or more yearnings might become manifest, then I am indulging in fantasy. Fantasy in the trivial is fine for light relief and is useful if writing fiction. But my yearnings are an integral component of the deepest part of me, that part which I have described as the 'indestructible essence', and it would be very foolish of me to allow any fantasies to trivialise them or, worse, blind me to their realisation when My Beautiful One decides to fulfil them, simply because my fantasies have created false expectations which may cause me to fail to see what has been presented to me.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

748 **What is beauty?**

Ultimately, beauty is the continuing, sublime, expression of infinite, steadfast, unconditional Love, whether in the awesome wonder of Nature, the healing touch of music, the tenderness of a poem or, above all, God's overwhelming and unique affection for each person. More than this, beauty *is* that Love. Small wonder that I have been drawn to call God 'My Beautiful One'.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

749 **Jealousy**

'You see jealousy is a potent cocktail of four other emotions, each one of them individually a force to be reckoned with ... Firstly there's resentment, which is, in itself, one of the most ruinous emotions in existence. The word comes from the French *ressentir* which means to feel again and again and again. So, when we hate somebody for doing or not doing something to or for us, it becomes like rust, eating away at our peace of mind ... Secondly we have anger and you know the trouble anger can cause, especially if one can find no way to express it healthily. It either transmutes almost immediately into depression, or else it explodes often with dire consequences. Thirdly, there's self-pity – "How dare they treat me like that!", and oh how we like to wallow in it at times ... [and the fourth ingredient] Desire to control others' responses: "They *should* love *me* or whatever.'"

(From 'Happily Ever After', story in *Life With Lucille*)

750 **God help us!**

As you said: God help us! A lifetime of experience tells me that he *always* does, but usually not in the ways that I expect. This hasn't been a perfect process. In the early 1990s, I went through a couple of excruciatingly painful years where I believed absolutely nothing. Very thankfully, it all turned out to be a pernicious illusion.

(From a letter, November 2015)

751 **When a relationship goes wrong**

In devastation and inertia,
They sit – near but not close –
In the newly refurbished sitting-room
Of their penthouse apartment
High up on the right side of town,
Two salary cheques in the bank,
Two cars in the underground car park,
And more, much more, besides,
But robbed by a merciless fate
Of the only thing they desire –
Each other.

Having everything,
But possessing nothing.

(From 'Turning Point', poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

752 **The end of a needless guilt trip**

My father died when I was nearly forty-three, so that I had time to develop a good father/son relationship with him – a fact for which I am very grateful. He had lost his wife, and I my mother, when I was just fourteen, and I am an only child.

In the many years that have gone by since he left this world, I have often found myself wondering, with regret, whether I showed him how important he was to me and how much I appreciated him. Surely, by the age of forty-three, I had acquired the good sense to communicate this valuable information to him. Perhaps; but the discomfiting doubts lingered.

A couple of days ago (February 2016), I was sorting through an over-abundance of old books in our home with a view to clearing out many of them, and I found a fine encyclopaedia of angling which I gave him as a gift a long while ago; he loved fishing. On the title page is an inscription in my handwriting: *To Daddy. Thank you for a wonderful summer; thank you for a wonderful holiday in Spain and, most of all, thank you for being a wonderful father. Your loving son, Kenneth.*

I was twenty-one.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

753 **The ‘TAG’ prayer**

Where prayer is concerned, I can sometimes go around in circles, now one way then another, and back to the first mode again. But when the chips are down (as they are all too often!), I have come to practise what I call the ‘TAG’ prayer: asking for Trust, Acceptance and Gratitude, and in that order. Why? I cannot accept what God is allowing into my life until I first trust him, and it is only when I have a measure of acceptance that I can become grateful for all the circumstances of my life. And why do I need to ask for them? Because they are gifts, the kind of gifts that come from God. So I ask for them. But why do I have to ask for them at all? Because God is the epitome of that most spiritual quality, courtesy; therefore he waits to be asked, but is always yearning to give. And getting to the point in my life when I know I need to ask for them is part of a learning process which is good for me. For many years I thought I had to grit my teeth, clench my knuckles and dredge these precious things up from somewhere within my finite self. I am glad I have finally woken up. Moreover, it is good for me to realise that *everything* I need is a gift from God.

As an interesting coincidence, *Tag* is the German word for ‘day’. So it is well for me to ask for these gifts of Trust, Acceptance and Gratitude just for today. Tomorrow will be taken care of when it arrives.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

754 **Familiarity breeds ...**

‘Funny thing about language, Fred. You can use a word for years, instinctively understanding its practical application, but when somebody asks you to clarify what it means, you grope painstakingly around the brain cells but can’t come up with a suitable explanation. Frustrating, that’s what it is!’

‘Give us an example.’

‘Well, only the other day a friend asked me to define the word “blessing” and I didn’t do very well, despite the fact that I use that term frequently.’

(From ‘What’s A Blessing?’, story in *Life With Fred*)

755 **The sights and sounds of autumn**

I hear the whisper of the breeze
In the summer-losing trees
And the leaves' crispness crackles.
Submissive to the sequence of the seasons
They, wrinkled, tumble, crinkled,
To the ground around me,
Weaving aerial patterns
In the winding of the wind
That gathers then quickly scatters
In seeming meaningless caprice.
A certain something beckons,
Through the mists of time and space,
To discard my many decades
And revive a guileless custom
To child-kick the transient piles
Of amber, russet and gold,
Rejoicing in the rustle
With a gleeful, boyish giggle,
Then, sentimental, reminisce,
Rapt memories reawakening.
Dry and brittle, they crumble
Under the roaming, random tread
Of the solitary rambler – I,
Who drink deeply of Nature
In the falling of the year,
Who watch the wedded swans,
Bare body height above the water,
Wing low in rhythmic flight
O'er the mist-cloaked, shining surface
Of the meandering, mirror-glass river,
Ethereal, unreal and mystical
In the sunlight's glow,
In the autumn flow
Of sights and sounds and smells,
In the fair light, then the fading light,
Preceding winter's night.
And I breathe the breath of life,
Fresh cleansed by recent rain,
And I dream of far beyond
Before that final stillness.

(‘Autumn’, poem in
Yearning For The Horizon)

756 **Perhaps obscure, perhaps not**

‘Supposing,’ said Fred one evening, for no reason that I could readily put my finger on at the time, ‘that you decided to attend a meeting of one of those self-help groups in order to assist you in coping with the many frustrating perplexities of the human condition and ...’

‘Don’t suppose, Fred; it’s a dangerous habit!’

‘And suppose,’ he continued, completely ignoring me, ‘that the person leading the meeting were to say, “We’d really like to hear the story of the difficulties in your life that brought you here for support, but we always finish our meetings punctually and our time is nearly up, so you’ll have to limit it to five seconds” – I mean, just suppose they were to put it up to you like that, could you do it?’

‘But of course,’ I replied. ‘How can you doubt it? You should know by now my impressive dexterity in the art of linguistic compression!’

‘Go on then!’

‘You’re sure you want to hear it?’

‘Yup!’

‘Okay, prepare yourself! I would simply say, “Expectations,” and then thank them all for listening.’

(From ‘Five Second Saga’, story in *Life With Fred*)

757 **Why I rarely discuss spirituality**

At times, I *share* – very selectively and cautiously – about my spirituality but, at this stage of my life, I rarely discuss it, argue about it or attempt to indoctrinate others with my perceptions of this vital matter. For me, the infinite realm of the spirit is, when all is said and done, beyond the human intellect, beyond language, hence beyond adequate, finite explanation, therefore – of its very nature – beyond debate. I do, of course, totally respect those who think differently, but I do not engage with them.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

758 **Why is God the way he is?**

But, you protest, why in heaven's name did the shepherd's original master plan so design sheep that they are obliged (if they know what's good for them) to trust him without understanding what he does or why he does it? Ah, now there you have me. I'd really like to give you a scholarly, logical and convincing answer, and I ought to be able to because I'm very intelligent. But the trouble is that I'm stuck with this finite human language, and my human intellect – which is also decidedly finite it seems – gets very confused and frustrated when I try to use it to unravel the infinite. Makes me feel a bit stupid actually.

(From 'Shepherd And Sheep', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

759 **The serenity prayer**

This prayer is very well known and widely used:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

It's a lovely prayer.

One day, however, I began to wonder about it, and these reflections came to mind: what if there are things I cannot change that God does not want me to accept? Perhaps, as an example, he does not want me to accept decades of a particular difficulty, wants me to continue the good fight as I have always done; had I not battled valiantly, I believe I would have folded long before now. And what if there are many things which I could find the courage to change, but which it would be most unwise to change? Interesting questions.

So, I have an alternative version of the prayer, which I like to use now and again, particularly when I feel confused about the way forward:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things you want me to accept, courage to change the things you want me to change, and the clarity to know your wishes.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

760 **The value of surrender**

‘We have two choices it seems to me,’ I philosophised to my cherished Muse who had, as is her wont, just dropped into my right hemisphere for a chat. ‘Either we accept all the circumstances of our lives just as they are, or we continually struggle to impose our own will on the general scheme of things. Our materialistic society, being decidedly a cult of achievement and a proponent of the supremacy of the individual, strongly advocates the latter approach. I, on the other hand, having punched in a goodly few decades on the planet, and having gradually garnered a smidgen of wisdom – if that’s what one would call it – am more inclined to the former strategy. A lot easier and less corrosive on the system, I would say, which, ... is a state of affairs devoutly to be desired ...’

‘Perhaps you wish to infer,’ suggested Lucille, ‘that surrender, particularly surrender of the heart, mind and spirit, is an ineffable paradox which brings liberation rather than defeat, and that the difficulty in explaining the apparent contradiction arises from the fact that one must have the courage to let go before the mystery unfolds. Comprehension, therefore, is empirical; it comes from experience rather than from any persuasive power in the theoretical expression of the philosophy.’

(From ‘The Convert’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

761 **Fred sets the record straight**

‘Oh, yes,’ I sighed nostalgically, ‘happy days, Fred, happy, carefree, sun-filled days. I used to have lots of chit-chats with, and confide my innermost thoughts to, my teddy bear. I didn’t know you then. Actually, I don’t think you appeared on the scene until I got beyond puberty. All those memories you have aren’t yours; you got them from me.’

I thought Fred would be upset at having his earlier existence denied, but he just smiled benevolently.

‘I was the teddy bear!’ he said softly.

(From ‘No Response’, story in *Life With Fred*)

762 **Gratitude for an unexpected poem**

I want to share a little miracle with you – and I tell it out of gratitude not boastfulness. My eldest son gave me a CD of Andrea Bocelli for Christmas, and there is one track on it that is a most beautiful romantic love song – in Italian. I decided that I would take two lines from the song, then write a poem in English with one of these lines in Italian at the beginning and the second at the end. So I set to work and finished up writing the entire poem in Italian. Italian was never the strongest of my languages and I haven't used it for nearly thirty years ... Now here's the little miracle: there were very few mistakes in it. The Italian girl who checked it was very impressed and described it as *Bellissima* (very beautiful). I don't know why I wrote it in Italian, and I just can't tell you how grateful I feel.

(From a letter, April 2005)

763 **Be yourself**

'David,' Tomas concluded, 'you have been placed in this world because you are very beautiful. Just be who and what you are. Do not try to be anything or anybody else. Thus will love grow within yourself, and thus will love be passed on from you to others. I very much like the proverb that runs, "If I am going to be like him, who is going to be like me?" Be, therefore, like David and nobody else. In what you may have to face in the future, it is from your inner environment that you will draw the resources that you need.'

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

764 **Does God ever forgive us?**

Well, does he? Not the way I see it. God's love for us is *unconditional* in the absolute sense of that word. Therefore, he cannot forgive us if he didn't condemn us in the first place. It is, however, natural, because of our human nature, for us to feel we need forgiveness whenever we have gone off the rails. So, God channels his love to us in the form of forgiveness to

honour us where we are, to respect our perceptions, to meet our needs.

A related issue is this: if God's love is unconditional, as in my profound, continuing experience it unquestionably is, will there be judgement on the last day, as certain scriptures tell us? How could there be? That would be a contradiction in terms. Imagine the God of unconditional love judging me because I didn't meet his conditions! It's absurd. Judgement on the last day? I think not. While one has to be careful to take quotations in isolation, we might, nevertheless, take a lesson from scripture when Jesus said, 'Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned.'^{*}

What's the likelihood that he tells us neither to judge nor condemn, then does it wholesale himself? Some may contend that he will judge us precisely because he is the only one who is qualified to do so, and therefore will because we have merited judgement or, in extreme cases, condemnation. Perhaps, but, if so, we have to believe in a God who will say, 'You have not met my conditions, therefore you may not have eternal happiness.' Now get this: the God of *unconditional* love will condemn us because we have not met his *conditions* ... I have *never* encountered such a God and have no desire to do so. The One who loves and breathes life into me (and countless millions of others) unconditionally in each moment operates on a totally different plane, countless light years removed from our finite attempts to define and limit him ...

Since God *is* the God of unconditional love ... he actually does not recognise my faults. Yet I have this innate sense that I need forgiveness from time to time and that I feel greatly healed when I receive it, as I always do. So God understands *our* need for forgiveness and, therefore, lets us experience his love, at such times, as forgiveness or as – a term I much prefer – his healing love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Luke 6:37, New International Version. Note: admonishing somebody caringly in order to bring them back on to the right track is, clearly, an entirely different process to judging.

765 **Redemption**

Of all the blows that fate has dealt
No one was e'er more cruelly felt
Than when an ancient structure cracked,
Then fell apart and left me wracked
With anguish, grief I scarce could stand
That rock could turn to shifting sand.
Then, near despair, my spirit blind,
A starlit sky inspired my mind
And eye to probe the vast façade,
(No rules imposed, no vain charade),
Where could nor rock nor sand impart
A hope that came straight to the heart.
Though nought was said that I could hear,
He bid me come into his sphere
Above all earthly preconceptions,
Transcending all my imperfections,
And did, in silent solace, tell,
Through life's illusions, all is well.
A trust in one who dwells in light
I found beyond the stars that night.
 Religion left me in the lurch;
 Now the night sky is my church.

(‘Star Struck’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

766 **Yearnings**

My many yearnings are like wild stallions running around inside my being: magnificent to behold, but they need to be brought under (God’s) control so that their immense vigour and energy (love) can be positively channelled and not dissipated in frantic and purposeless toing and froing. And indeed, a good number of them have already been brought into alignment, but others still need the lasso treatment. Unlike the wild stallions, however, who desperately kick and struggle against being controlled, I long to have all my yearnings channelled into God’s way, for his is the only way.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

767 **Mission in a fast food joint**

‘Well, now that we’re here, can we do any good? I mean that’s why we’re working together,’ asked Jasmine.

‘Hmm!’

‘You look pensive,’ she said.

‘Only because the mission I have in mind is, if not impossible, highly improbable.’

Jasmine was one step ahead of me: ‘They use vast amounts of paper, cardboard and plastic in here, and you think they ought to have much more consideration for the planet’s scarce resources.’

I still wasn’t used to the fact that she could read my thoughts sometimes, but I was happy to know that she was on my wavelength.

‘Precisely, my esteemed fairy. Just look at the debris in front of us after my recent orgy of coffee and doughnuts. One paper tray cover, one cardboard cup, one plastic cup cover, four plastic mini-milks, two empty sugar sachets, one wooden stirrer, three paper bags and three serviettes. And all destined for the trash can. Disgraceful really. Irresponsible actually.’

(From ‘Mission Improbable’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

768 **Is God a mystery?**

In one way, God is an absolute mystery, but I sense that, at the most fundamental and crucial level, he is so incredibly up front that it’s hard to grasp. God is just pure love – that’s it. But since the human view of love is necessarily imperfect and we cannot, in our human state, understand the infinite nature of pure love, we explain it away by saying that it is a mystery. I am coming around to the view that God is so simple that most of us miss it – not in structure or composition (much for want of better words) but in essence: he is simply *Pure Love*. And the mind-boggling reason that I am coming around to that view is that I am experiencing more and more of that love moment to moment, regardless of appearance or circumstance.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

769 **Further thoughts on humility**

Until now (August 2006), I have always considered the following to be the best definition of humility I have ever come across: *The correct estimation of who I am*; and indeed it is excellent. Tonight, however, I found myself wondering if I could unearth an even better one (for me, that is) and it came immediately from somewhere deep within: *Ultimately, humility is the deepest desire to love and be loved without condition*. This is infinitely more profound because it does more than say who I am; it goes under the who-I-am to what motivates the who-I-am, to what my motive power is. ... And why is that humility? Because I am utterly incapable of trawling up that kind of love or that depth of desire from my own finite resources. Both are gifts from God, and when I realise and acknowledge that fact I am being humble in the best possible sense ...

I must not impose the impossible condition on myself to love perfectly in this way. Even the greatest saints were finite human beings and, at best, expressed this love imperfectly. Humility, as now defined, states a perfect ideal. My purpose in life is largely about coming as close (or, much more appropriately, about *being brought* as close) to that ideal as is humanly possible, remembering to do my best to love myself unconditionally also – and not berating myself for the many times that I fall far short of the ideal. God never berates me, so why should I?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

770 **Sensitive listener**

‘How on earth,’ I enquired gloomily, ‘can one be surrounded by a loving family, a cluster of true and loyal friends, the most sterling of colleagues, a significant assemblage of sound acquaintances, all the distraction and entertainment that one could wish for, and still be lonely?’

Lucille, being the galaxy’s most sensitive listener, instantly inferred from my tone that a reply was not required and merely awaited further developments.

(From ‘Now, That’s Inspiration’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

771 **God and his motives**

... in ranting against God for the pervasive suffering on the planet, we make the mistake of thinking that what happens on Earth is the be-all and end-all of everything, and that the existence or non-existence of God, and if he exists his motives, can be judged only by what happens here, whether it's a tsunami that kills thousands or a little child with terminal cancer. When one gets even a glimpse of the bigger picture, it becomes possible to see that view for what it is: in compassion, entirely understandable, but a complete fallacy – and one which, regrettably, has caused untold heartache for centuries.

(From 'Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II',
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

772 **Understanding**

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding.*

(Proverbs 3:5, New International Version)

The real wisdom of not leaning on my own understanding came to me when I finally realised that I understand *nothing*. At best, I have a fleeting acquaintance with apparent facts and apparent situations. Very sound advice, therefore, not to lean on that which does not exist. How heartily, therefore, can I agree with Albert Einstein: *Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

773 **Do we ever really grow up?**

'I have never admitted this to anybody before,' I confided to Fred in a somewhat embarrassed and diffident manner, 'but often, when I look in the mirror, I am amazed to find myself gazing at what appears to be a mature adult of the late middle-aged variety, yet when I look deep into the eyes all I see is a three-year-old little boy – and a frightened one at that.'

(From 'A Sheep In Wolf's Clothing', story in *Life With Fred*)

774 **Loving by proxy**

She is unaware of my discreet gaze,
I have never seen her before,
But as I look at her across the café,
My eyes are attracted to a familiar something about her,
Slowly pulling back the chair on which she is to sit,
Placing her jacket, bag and book on another,
And setting her cup of hot chocolate on the table.
She sits, unwinds, crosses legs, and pensively stirs;
But though I observe her,
My thoughts are of you.

She is slim, hazel-eyed, raven-tressed,
Her doffed jacket revealing elegant shoulders,
Pretty and fetching, yet demure.
She glances back to the door now and again
As if expecting a companion,
But he does not come to join her.
Pity, I muse.
Her demeanour hints at a desire for company,
Yet, she seems not to mind.
But though I ponder her circumstances,
My thoughts are of you.

(From 'Proxy', poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

775 **Unconditional?**

For years I struggled with a particular concept of faith, namely the one that declares that we must have a strong and expectant faith if we want God to do what we ask, or else our prayers – while always commendable – will have little effect ...

By implication, those who have some inherent ability to exercise this kind of faith get looked after, and those who don't are left to suffer on by a God whose love, we are told time and again, is unconditional, creating what is probably the most inexcusable mixed message of all time: The God of unconditional love will answer your prayers *if* you have enough faith.

(From 'The "If" God', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

776 **What do I mean when I say ‘My world’**

‘Welcome! Do please come in to my world.’ Nice sentiments, but a bit fanciful, for we all live in the same world, don’t we? No, we don’t. The physical world which we all inhabit is, in fact, but a tiny part of each person’s reality. We each perceive the world differently, and my perceptions are reality for me. But there is a host of non-material ‘things’ which are more vital ingredients of my world, from the thoughts which emanate from my intellect to the sublime presences in my spirit, and so much more besides. Albert Einstein said that reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one. So, my world is very different from the worlds of others, even of those who are near and dear to me. In a very real sense, we all live in a different world. It’s not just a philosophical proposition. And, contrary to my welcome, it is virtually impossible for you to come into my world, or for me to go into yours. Occasionally, we may get a temporary visa to visit a small part of somebody else’s world, but that’s about it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

777 **You just can’t trust it**

The body gets us in a fix
When, now and then, it plays mean tricks.
Of all the pranks that aggravate,
The quirks that most exasperate –
Like wispy hair that won’t lie flat,
And wishing thin, then waxing fat,
Like itchy parts one cannot reach,
And sudden burps that manners breach,
Like freckles brown that won’t unite
And fake a suntan overnight,
Like feet that smell like rancid cheeses,
The twitchy nose that won’t make sneezes –
Its favourite tease, its cruellest dart,
Is the shame of an unscheduled fart.

(‘An Ill Wind’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

778 **The God of unconditional love**

I have often heard what, to me, is seriously flawed teaching mostly about faith, which may be roughly summarised as follows: God is presented by almost all spiritual teachers (particularly in the Christian tradition) as a God of unconditional love. Yet the same teachers, in the very next breath will tell us that God will do this, that or the other *if* ... such a condition most frequently, in my experience, employed relative to healing and other important needs and desires, and the requisite faith. So, is he a God of unconditional love or is he not?

For my money, there is a world of difference between a condition and what I call a 'natural sequence'. To elaborate:

- ✧ *Condition*: 'I will heal you *if* you have faith.'
- ✧ *Natural sequence*: 'I give you this gift unconditionally. I do not even make it a condition that you have to reach out for it; I place it in your hands. There is of course a natural sequence in operation: immediately following my giving the gift, you need to accept it. If you choose to reject my gift, then I will not force it upon you.'

To put it another way, the act of giving is not truly fulfilled until the gift has been received, therefore the bestowal of a gift needs two participants, the giver and the recipient, but the giver has no control over the recipient's response. God gives the gift *unconditionally*, but *I* have to open the package and use the contents.

Human givers may well abandon their efforts after a gift has been rejected, but the divine giver knows intimately the heart and the circumstances of the recipient at any given moment, and will return to offer the gift time after time until that person is ready to receive it. Now that's unconditional love.

I believe that God *always* gives us what we need unconditionally, even in the darkest hours, even when we cannot see. All we have to do is receive it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

779 **What the dark night of the soul is**

It is clear to me ... that the dark night of the soul, in total contrast to the popular but uninformed understanding of the term, is the means by which God clears things and perceptions that were once useful but are now obsolete – together with the inevitable junk – out of my life in order to make space within me for the stupendously beautiful foretaste of forever (pure love) that has utterly transformed my life beyond the dreams of a thousand lifetimes ... And the transformation continues day by day, moment to moment. To put it another way: God takes us to places that we could not or would not go ourselves so that we might grow in love with him. This process can be extremely painful, but also mind-blowingly beautiful.

I can now see clearly that two phrases ... that I have been using for many years are in fact closely allied and perfectly express *my* experience of the dark night of the soul when put together in one sentence: *In my life, the pain is the soil in which the miracles grow*, and *This state of being frequently leaves me feeling utterly bewildered*.

Note that the bewilderment is not in itself painful, rather a sensation of knowing and not knowing at one and the same time. And what do I know? I know only that I am loved beyond all measure and that I love in return with a passion that is difficult to contain. And what do I *not* know? Pretty much everything else! However, at times – thankfully much less often than heretofore – I can lose sight even of what I have just related, and these are my darkest hours.

(From ‘Afterword’, *Perspectives*, 3rd edn)

780 **Not what I was expecting!**

‘How do you stop a bull charging?’ asked my youngest son, with just a hint of a twinkle in his eye. When I failed to proffer a suitable suggestion, he informed me, knowledgeably, that this remarkable feat could be achieved by the simple expedient of removing the animal’s credit cards.

(From ‘Flexible Friends’, story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

781 **Pro life**

How describe orchestral sounds
To friends who cannot hear,
To them who lack the sense of touch,
The trickle of a tear,
To folks whose lips are ever sealed,
The joys of conversation;
To eyes that never see the light,
A visual sensation?
But even though one find the words
The senses to adorn,
There is no way to speak of life
To babes who won't be born.

(‘Senseless’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

782 **Going around in circles?**

If I ever gave it any thought at all in my earlier years, I suppose I assumed that some of life’s experiences cause misery while others evoke joy.

It is only relatively recently that it has become clear to me that a watershed experience I had in 1976 turns out to have been the catalyst both of the most excruciating anguish and the most mind-blowing blessings. Whoever said, ‘God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform’ sure said a mouthful.

This makes me wonder whether pain and joy are very close to each other – perhaps are one and the same. If I can imagine myself positioned at one particular point (an ‘oasis’) on the circumference of an enormous circle: to go east on the circle brings one into pain and to go west, joy. If, however, I go far enough in the easterly direction, I will eventually finish up in the west. Conversely, if I travel west into joy, I will eventually meet pain, and further on, joy again.

What keeps me going in this life perhaps is the notion that, even though I go round in circles – indeed because I go round in circles – I inevitably reach joy often enough to give me the strength to continue the journey. Moreover, any

process of going round in circles is not as repetitive as it might seem. The landscape on the circle is constantly changing and I have two choices it seems:

- ✧ Trudge around with my eyes cast downward and stay stuck in meaningless misery.
- ✧ Observe and learn from the ever-changing landscape of my life, despite the pain, and stay alert to recognise when I arrive in joy.

If I opt for the latter strategy, the appreciation of joy next time round will be all the greater. In the former, however, I will come to joy in due course, but trudge through it unnoticed because I am not aware – not fully alive.

To be fully alive is a bittersweet potion because it is composed of both joy and pain. We don't know what the relevant proportions will be until we are on the journey, and it varies from person to person. The most disconcerting aspect of all this is that, sometimes, when I am on the darkest sector of the eastern part of the circle, I can be temporarily conned into believing that there is no western part.

I'm not too sure if any of this makes sense, but what I do believe is that, at one transitional point in our existence, God puts a stop to our cyclical east–west meanderings, and gives us permanent resident status in Joy.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

783 **Beware Shrove Tuesday!**

My pancake's worthy of a prize,
But shame is what I'm feeling,
For, in tossing with excessive zeal,
I attach it to the ceiling.
Her teasing's more than I can bear
(The one who shares my life),
So I pour the mixture over her –
She's now a battered wife.

(‘Out Of The Frying Pan’, poem in
Save Us From The Well-meaning!)

784 **Mixed messages!**

- ✧ ‘But of course! I’d just love to see all your wonderfully boring holiday photographs and your delightfully stupid home videos.’
- ✧ ‘We don’t smoke, thank you, but please feel free to light up. Pollute our home at will; treatment for cancer in passive smokers is improving every day.’
- ✧ ‘Your new dress is absolutely gorgeous. No really, I mean it. It’s what fills it that’s the problem.’
- ✧ ‘Not at all; don’t give it another thought. The riotous all-night party in your house didn’t wake us up. We never got to sleep in the first place, damn you!’
- ✧ ‘I think your poetry is sublimely beautiful. Your kindergarten teacher must have been chuffed when you showed it to her.’
- ✧ ‘It’s quite all right with me if you leave the television blaring while I try to confide to you my innermost feelings. They’re not the least bit important. I’m only suicidal.’

Finally, dear readers, the crowning glory, or the *pièce de résistance* if you prefer:

- ✧ ‘Your ugly brute of a wrinkled baby, who stinks of urine and shit, is the most beautiful child I have ever seen.’

(From ‘Transition’, essay in *In My Write Mind*)

785 **Self-praise**

The old dictum that self-praise is no praise is utter nonsense, and has probably caused a lot of damage to many people who have swallowed it whole. When self-praise is a self-administered pat on the back in acknowledgement of the good that is in us, it becomes one of the healthiest things we can do for our emotional well-being. We are talking about an accurate assessment of our true worth here, not false pride or vanity.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

786 **Truce**

I was in the mood for a good moan, a substantial groan, a grouse, a grumble, possibly some harmless gossip, a conversation, a chit-chat and all that sort of thing. Fred, on the other hand, was unusually quiet, and I was about to remonstrate with him for his incivility and uncustomary reticence when I experienced an inner nudge, beyond the realms of intellect and normal sense experience, that recommended me to shove a sock in it. Almost immediately, a seldom but welcome peace descended upon me and, intuitively, I knew that Fred and I were in a rare state of truce.

(From 'Temple', story in *Life With Fred*)

787 **Channel?**

When I choose to love and help others with the Love I have been given, I am more than a channel. Channels are inanimate conduits. They are not conscious of what they are doing. We, in complete contrast, can *consciously* choose to reach out to others from and with the Love we have received. When we approach being of service to others in this way, as I have said elsewhere, it is done as a spontaneous response to divine Love rather than out of a sense of duty, and it is both freeing and fulfilling.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

788 **Impatience**

'From time to time, my dearest Lucille, I hear something that I wish I could have had the wisdom to say, together with the presence of mind to say it at the right moment. I heard one such quotable quote yesterday, to wit: *Religion is for those who believe there is a hell; spirituality is for those who have been there.* Now there you have a universal and profound truth in a few simple, well-chosen words. Why can't I think of something like that? Come to think of it, why don't you inspire me to say something meaningful and wise?'

(From 'Fancy That!', story in *Life With Lucille*)

789 **Perfectionism – hard to shift**

There is this voice inside my cranium,
More lethal far than spent uranium,
Who, without my permission, operates a running commentary;
A tyrant's whip, an iron grip, no let-up even momentary.
I do my best in word and action
To give the scoundrel satisfaction,
Yet always yield to every whim of his judgemental mould,
His rule of guilt, his clout inbuilt. See, all he does is scold.
He urges feats of sheer perfection
But always schemes, without exception,
To hover backstage, primed to strike, till I have done my bit,
And, though perceived I've much achieved, says he: "That
wasn't it."

"Tis time to give this creep the shoulder,
And have some fun ere I grow older,
But I need a ruthless method to remove him from my brain.
I know: I'll run and get a gun, and terminate his reign.
But that would be a foolish tactic;
'Twould bring an end anti-climactic,
And leave me all alone when I retire inside my head,
Plus one ungentle incidental: I too would wind up dead.

(“Till Death Do Us Part”, poem in *Thomas Matthews – A Selection*)

790 **Understanding God**

As I have said elsewhere, trying to understand God's ways is a completely wasted effort. His ways are so incredibly higher than ours. Imagine an amoeba (a single-cell creature) deciding to do a PhD in microbiology in order to understand its origins and its destiny. This would be actually more feasible than for us to understand the Creator. The only alternative is acceptance and, as I have discovered, acceptance is a gift, not something I can dredge up from my own finite resources. So I have to ask for it on a daily basis.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* I have written a light-hearted view of this topic in a story called 'Shepherd and Sheep'.

791 **Writers' workshops**

I tried one, yet again, earlier in the year. Oh dear, everybody critiquing everybody else's work, and you finish up with poems by committee, not original compositions. I didn't go back after the first night. Just to give you an idea, the girl to my left was the first to read her poem – a lovely piece with the word 'I' in it several times. The presenter stroked his chin thoughtfully for a few seconds, then said, 'I don't like "I" in poems.' This was too much for me. 'For heaven's sake,' I said, 'the presenter of the last workshop I attended didn't like "you" in poems. At this rate we're going to run out of pronouns.'

(From a letter, August 2004)

792 **Weakness, thy name is fairy**

'I'd give a king's ransom for a bar of chocolate right now.'

'You won't have to pay that much,' she said, her tone of voice clearly betraying disappointment that the spell seemed not to be doing its thing yet. But she persevered: 'Here's a sweet shop. Go in and buy one, and you'll see the craving is gone. You'll just throw it in the bin.'

I went into the shop and bought two. The first one I scoffed as quickly as I could get the paper off. 'Oh, yum!' I said, 'Scrumptious!' The second I offered to Jasmine who was looking at me in dismay.

'Oh, yuk! How could you? I've never eaten human food.'

I peeled off the wrapping and held out the bar temptingly.

'There's always a first time!'

'It looks disgusting, that dirty brown colour.'

'Just try it!'

'Well all right then. I'll do it if only to show you that these things can be resisted; I shall take one bite and throw the rest away.'

She took a tentative bite and her eyes opened wide. 'Mmmm, delicious!' she exclaimed, and ate the rest in two mouthfuls. 'Why didn't I know about this stuff decades ago?'

(From 'Mission Impossible', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

793 **Sensitivity is not selective**

At this point in my life I seem to lack, almost entirely, emotional insulation ... I can be very sensitive to hurt and emotional pain, sensitive to just a word, a look, even to relatively harmless innuendo. I have discovered, however, that sensitivity is not selective, that is to say, I cannot be sensitive to one aspect of my life and insensitive to another. Consequently, this facet of my personality also renders me open and sensitive to the incredible beauty, wonder and miracles that are both around and within me (especially the latter). Indeed it often seems to be the sensitivity to my own hurt and pain that produces the beauty, wonder and miracles. Strange paradox! It also renders me sensitive to the hurt and needs of others, which in turn enables me to be more compassionate and, therefore, in a better position to be of service to them where appropriate, although I have to be careful not to absorb their pain, which I have a tendency to do. Bearing all this in mind, it is understandable that I have come to coin for myself the phrase: *In my life, pain is the soil in which the miracles grow*. In a very real sense, the misery and the miracles are Siamese twins.

In short, my life is by far the most difficult and, at times, the most excruciatingly painful experience I have ever lived through; it is also the most stunningly beautiful!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

794 **With love, one never knows**

This wasn't meant to happen;
A platonic farewell handshake,
At most, an affectionate parting peck on the cheek
Was all it was intended to be,
No more, no less.
Yet here am I, enfolded in your arms,
Placing pent-up kisses on your upturned face.

(From 'For Dear Life', poem in *Hang On!*)

795 **Goddesses can be human too**

‘I’ve never heard you singing before; you should do it more often. You’ve got a nice voice,’ came the compliment.

‘Nice of you to say so, Lucille, though you must be listening to me through a rose-tinted filter; nobody has ever admired my singing before. Come to think of it, maybe that’s because I never sing. Anyway, nice song* – Tanya Tucker, one of my favourites.’

‘Like I said, you should sing some more; but, to tell the truth, what prompted me to interrupt your serenade was the substance of the song I was thinking about nothing in particular when I heard your voice wafting toward me and the words hit me in the pit of the stomach. We carry our burdens with us everywhere, don’t we? Travel, and they travel with us; the further we go, the further they go. Unwanted, omnipresent companions; unrelenting limpets! The ghosts of regret never leave us.’

‘In a philosophical mood today?’ I asked, but she did not reply, and I immediately sensed that she was in distress. ‘Want to talk about it, Lucille?’

(From ‘Release’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

* *Can’t Run From Yourself* by Tanya Tucker – look up the lyrics.

796 **God commands nothing**

God commands nothing; he just gives and gives and gives. So the answer to my question ... ‘What, then, since we have choice, is the optimum choice in the use of this love?’ becomes obvious. When I choose love and become inundated by the infinite, steadfast, unconditional love of God, I love in return with my entire being. In a sense – which paradoxically does not invalidate the statement that we have choice – once the intensity of God’s love for me is experienced, I have ‘no choice’ but to respond in love, for I am completely taken up with the loved one in every fibre of my being. This love is so intense and powerful that it will then reach out to others as a love response, not as submission to a command.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

797 **Understudy?**

'I say, Lucille, I've just got a brilliant idea: maybe you could take a good number of my lectures for me this year and ease the burden on my ageing frame and intellect. You'd be a wow, my treasure; you're intelligent, gifted, beautiful, and since, as noted elsewhere in these chronicles, you wear no clothes, I have no doubt but that the overall effect on the assembled gatherings would be a complete knock-out. How about it, old thing?'

Lucille just listened, though now with a hint of a smile.

(From 'The Non-Directive Counsellor', story in *Life With Lucille*)

798 **Really letting go**

I have written elsewhere of my expectations – my unrealistic ones at least – being my downfall.

I say many times each day, 'Let go, let God.' However, there is a tendency, when I say it for my subconscious to continue the conversation wordlessly. If translated into words, the 'monologue' might go something like this: 'Let go, let God – so that he will fix me, heal me, give me peace, let me reach out to others, let my writing find a wider audience, give me real purpose for my life ...' In other words, I am letting go so that God will fulfil my expectations. That is not letting go at all, quite the reverse in fact. I am holding on to the desire to have the things I want from God.

The only way then is simply to let go – full stop! By this, I mean that I simply let go of everything *unconditionally*. But I am not capable, in my human weakness, of doing that. So the best thing for me to do is to say to My God, 'I am making the *decision* to let go; the implementation of that decision will have to be yours.' When I let go in this way, I open the door for God to come in and take over the running of my life in whatever way he chooses.

In this light, it is better for me to say, 'Your way, not mine.' It is much more unequivocal – hard for me to misinterpret or for my subconscious to augment.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

799 **Childhood**

I had an unusual childhood in many ways, much of it (particularly between the ages of six and eleven) very happy, but some of it what people nowadays might call dysfunctional – an emotive word which tends to make me believe that I missed out in some way or was disadvantaged by an inadequate childhood. But the truth is that I received two essential ingredients from my Mum and Dad to give me a solid foundation in life: I *knew* I was wanted and I *knew* I was loved. I have *never* had cause to doubt that for one second. Perfection, of course, it was not, and I was a lonely child at times, but they gave me their love and much more besides. What more could one ask for? And the God Of My Life has more than compensated for any deficiency – even if it has taken him a lifetime!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

800 **Acceptance**

Let it, let it be.
Strive no more to discover
The meaning of life,
To decode the inscrutable,
Change the immutable,
Courting complexity,
Worthless analysis
Which leads to paralysis
Of psyche and soul.
What human profanity,
Intellectual vanity,
To think I could fathom
The essence of truth.
In the interests of sanity,
I'll have to surrender,
Accord to engender,
And just let it be
And let life find me.

(‘Let It Be’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

801 **In control of our lives? No way!**

Okay, let's run with that notion for a few lines: it is vital for me to be in control of my life. Before I go any further, let me say what I believe my life to comprise. It is not just what is inside my mind and body; if it were, I might have some hope of exerting limited control. Even then, my body can have reactions (illness etc.) which I may or may not be able to cure and cannot always prevent, and my mind, without my permission, can go in directions that I do not wish it to (explosive anger and resentments or fantasy and infatuation, for example). My life, however, whether I like it or not, also includes in very significant measure, a large number of people, philosophies, places, things and situations which are outside myself. Therefore, if I am to be in control of my life, I must of necessity be in control of all these as well. Anybody who gives it even a cursory examination will quickly reject that ideal as absolutely impossible. Yet we still cling tenaciously to the belief that we have to be in control of our lives. Curious to say the least; highly questionable to say the most.

(From 'The Cult Of Control', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

802 **An analogy for my life**

I have often used this analogy: my life is like a giant coin. On one side there are endless blessings and miracles (and I mean miracles), and on the other are the difficulties and misery, sometimes almost unbearable. Solution: cut through the coin laterally so as to remove the painful side. Result: the coin will still have a second side to which the difficulties will attach themselves anew. It is impossible to have a one-sided coin.

What does all this mean? In my case (and I am sure in the case of countless others) the pain and the joy are Siamese twins on my journey through life. Indeed, and I have often said this, the pain is the soil in which the miracles grow, so the two are inseparable for the moment. I call this the pain/joy enigma: excruciatingly painful at times, but also astonishingly beautiful. Who am I to question it?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

803 **The reading public's loss**

‘And I thought that that literary agent chappie would have welcomed my collection of exam howlers* like a starving dog discovering five tons of Pedigree Chum. He kept it long enough to read it ten times, the blighter. I mean, doesn't he realise that I have painstakingly observed and assiduously collected a galaxy of the most delightful bloomers made over many years by hundreds of students, bless their little hearts? The great public out there would scoop them up like a thirsty camel slurping up water, but he turned the opus down, damn him.’

(From ‘Off Colour’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

* *Fawltly Toorism* – another privately produced volume, November 1998, and the Millennium Edition of same, November 2000.

804 **Contentment in the ordinary**

I wanted excitement in my life most of the time, and went to considerable lengths in pursuit of it, eventually to discover that excitement comes but occasionally, and that the obsessive search for it left me frequently in a state of frustration and depression when my high expectations weren't met. It was only then that I stumbled on a truth that was so obvious I almost missed it: by far the greater part of my life is composed of ordinary things. From that realisation, it was a simple but vital step to accepting that if I can learn to be content with the ordinary things in my life, I will be content most of the time!

(From Part 8 of *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*, 3rd edn)

805 **I need to lighten up**

It was clear that the impression I had gained on the day I mentioned at the start of this account, was spot on, namely that my new-found friend from the realm of the fairies has a delightful sense of humour. A good thing. It's high time I lightened up.

(From ‘Mission Impossible’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

806 **The worst peacetime invention?**

Doubtless there are many contenders for this title, and what to select depends on one's perspective. I wouldn't be surprised, for instance, if future generations find digital technology to have been both the best and the worst of developments; most notably, I believe the potential for the misuse of the rapidly evolving technology of artificial intelligence is scary to say the least. In terms of its capability to invade people's privacy, the technology makes the scenario depicted in George Orwell's novel *1984* seem disturbingly plausible. And who knows what a mixed bag of blessing and blight genetic engineering may bring upon us? But for the present, for me, the device to win the unenviable accolade of the worst peacetime invention is the ubiquitous one-eyed monster. Apart from being a magnetic blight in almost all homes, the intrusive pest is everywhere, from fast food joints to hospital waiting rooms. You can relax; I'm not going to go on about it. I know I'm swimming against the tide, and very few will agree with me. Suffice it to say that my never-to-be-realised dream is a television-free world. Okay, so I'm odd; and to tell the truth, I'm perfectly okay with that.

To be fair, I readily acknowledge that many find television relaxing, entertaining, educational and so on, and I stress that my view on this topic, as all my other views, are saying how things are for me. I have no mission to convert the world. Although, that said ...!

Actually, I'm not being quite truthful here. As a child, I loved television. Believe it or not, the technology was much better back then: one channel, transmitting only from 6pm to 11pm, take it or leave it, all harmless family viewing; also frequent intervals between programmes when they screened a calming rippling stream for several minutes, and regular breakdowns to give viewers a breather. What's more, the early television service was good for one's physical well-being. There were no remotes, so you had to get out of your chair each time you wanted to adjust the sound and vision, and this was pretty often because the forerunners of today's televisions frequently went off track. In addition, you had to give it

regular thumps of a fist or well-aimed kicks to get it going after it had had a seizure. The net result of all this exertion was that one regularly exercised the principal muscle groups.

Nowadays, it's hundreds of channels, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week – some good programming, but much of it of very questionable standard; worse, no holds barred on obscene language, nudity, unbridled sex and gratuitous violence – plenty of channels from which parents have to protect their children. Not to mention graphic images of daily disasters in the four corners of the globe, captured virtually as they are happening, projected by round-the-clock news channels into the sanctuary of our homes. And if we're not near a television, we can pick it all up on our computer, tablet or smartphone, no matter where we are. Added to that, we have the digital recording and station replay facilities, so that we can stay up all night watching the rubbish we missed on channels X, Y and Z while we were watching the garbage on channels A, B and C. And as for physical activity, the former scheme of things has been replaced with baleful couch-potato inertia. And that's all progress is it? God help us!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

807 **My study**

'I really love this study,' I murmured to myself.

'So do I,' said a quiet voice in my ear.

'Oh, hello Lucille. Glad you dropped in. Actually, I wasn't thinking of writing anything just now, but it's always delightful to have your company. Yes, as I was saying, I really like my study. It has much to recommend it: an atmosphere of work, but one of relaxation too, a place for me, a place for my friends, a place for quiet reflection – a place, in short which would be more than adequately described by that wonderful, untranslatable word, beloved of our German brethren, *Gemütlich*. It implies that the object one is using it to describe combines atmosphere, cosiness, ambience, character, and a whole lot more besides.'

(From 'Short 'n Sweet', story in *Life With Lucille*)

808 **Is there life on other worlds?**

The one-eyed monster had me in its seldom grip:
I chanced to glance when science fiction was on offer,
And became reluctantly thereto affixed.
Life on other worlds light years distant
Discovered in one hour of video melodrama,
Dialogue artfully scripted,
Visuals breathtakingly spectacular,
The ensemble far-fetched yet realistic,
And I – for one fleeting moment – am convinced
That I have brethren in the outer cosmos.

(From 'No Limits', poem in *Voice Of The Man-child*)

809 **Taking care of the departed**

... I fell to reflecting that perhaps many people die leaving unfinished business, that possibly this leaves them in a state of restiveness – perhaps temporarily suspended in some way we don't understand between this life and the next – and that it falls to us, where possible, to finish it for them.

(From 'In The Picture', story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

810 **Happiness?**

Much of what I have read about happiness seems to suggest that it is a state of relative bliss to which most of us aspire and some people reach. My experience, however, is that there is another kind of happiness, a kind where, even when there are storms raging through my life, and the darkness threatens to engulf me, fundamentally, at the deepest level – in what I call the indestructible essence at the core of my being – *all is well*, in the fullest possible sense of those words. It is my perception that this is a happiness that is not well understood in the world at large. Also my experience is that I have had the times of the 'relative bliss' type of happiness, but they do not endure. The deeper level of happiness, however, is infinitely more steadfast: it lasts forever.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

811 **What is normality?**

Many years ago I came across a quotation about normality which I really liked, and recently I tried to find the source but couldn't. However, this is my recollection of it:

One of the greatest mistakes we can make is to assume that what the majority do, what is most common, is normal. Normality is associated with that which is healthy, wholesome and life-giving.

There are many things which the world thinks are normal, because so many people do them, but which in fact are not healthy, wholesome and life-giving at all. Where I have to be careful, however, is not to be prescriptive. To take just one example: I might claim that watching television for four hours or so per day is common, but not normal in the sense given here. However, that is too simplistic a view. If viewer A is a couch potato and watches junk, then that would not be normal. Viewer B, however, may have a very healthy lifestyle, and watch programmes that are positive, educational and contribute to the worthwhile work they do. That would definitely be normal. Likewise, others may also have a healthy lifestyle, and find that watching light and bright television programmes helps them to relax and switch off from the stresses of daily life.

Thus, what is normal for one may not be normal for another. Perhaps the best way forward is for each of us to examine the various activities in our lives and ask ourselves, respecting each one: 'Is this healthy, wholesome, and life-giving *for me*?', not forgetting to assess the impact these activities may have on those around us.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

812 **Many paths ...**

It is just beginning to dawn on me that God ... must be great enough to be perceived – and received – in many more ways than one.

(From a letter, June 1995)

813 **Holy, holy, whole!**

It is interesting to note that the words ‘Heal’ and ‘Holy’ almost certainly have the same origin, e.g. Old English ‘hal’, meaning whole or healthy. Healed and Holy, then, mean to be whole in the fullest sense of the word, whereas ‘Holy’ is so often equated today with sanctimoniousness or unattainable virtue. In modern German, for instance, *heilen* is ‘to heal’ and *heilig* is ‘holy’. So when I refer to God as ‘The Holy One’ I am really saying ‘The One Who Is Whole’. Likewise, referring to the Pope or the Dalai Lama as ‘His Holiness’ could be rendered as ‘His Wholeness’.

It is worth remembering that we are human because God made us that way. In this context, then, wholeness, for all practical purposes, includes our humanness in its fullest sense, and does not mean unattainable perfection. Thank God!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

814 **Repetitive prayer**

God doesn’t need repetitive prayer, but I do – to remind me of my total reliance on him, and to keep the channel between him and me open and clear of debris. God knows what I want/need before I ask, but I believe he lets me ask repetitively in order to keep me focused on what I have requested so that when he makes it available, transmits the response to my request so to speak, I will be tuned in and not miss the ‘broadcast’. Older radios needed constant tuning or they went off station. The station just kept broadcasting, but the receiving radio needed to be retuned daily at least. That’s all God wants me to do – keep tuned to his wavelength. That’s the purpose of repetitive prayer. So, in this sense, repetitive prayer is not so much prayer as the tuning-in process.

To use another analogy, many seaports silt up and have to be dredged regularly to keep the vital channels open for the receiving of valuable cargo. Likewise, repetitive prayer keeps my vital channel from silting up.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

815 **Fred teaches a lesson**

‘There is no shame,’ said Fred, ‘in turning back or taking a new direction if you are on the wrong road. God loves a trier; he never said anything about succeeding all the time. Where’s your faith?’

I felt as if I had been hit in the solar plexus with a concrete block. Fred had got it so right that there was no room for argument or debate ...

(From ‘About Turn’, story in *Life With Fred*)

816 **A fairy’s mission – slow to get started**

‘The only thing I can remember is what my father told me when I was twenty-one, about two hundred years ago. “Jasmine,” he said, “you are not like the other fairies; you are wonderful and I love you dearly, but you are a little forgetful, and in order to fulfil your purpose in life, you will have to find a human to work with. Take heart: fairies who work with humans are very rare, so you are special. You should be proud.” There was more, but that is all I can remember.’

‘That’s amazing. And how many humans have you worked with in the two hundred years?’

‘Um ... not very many.’

‘Yes, but how many though, even at a rough guess?’

‘Well, let me see now, um ... at a rough guess, er ... none actually!’

(From ‘Patience Is A Virtue’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

817 **Self-pity**

My final point is probably the most important one: I think you yourself have highlighted the principal current problem (and give yourself credit; many people don’t see this about themselves): self-pity. Self-pity, as I said when we spoke the other day, I believe to be the principal source of all our trouble. It leads us to think, say and do things which damage ourselves and, in many cases, others.

(From a letter, August 2015)

818 **That's love**

Tonight there is a celebration,
And, mingling among our invited guests,
We have drifted –
Inevitably because of the nature of the occasion –
Into separate clusters of polite small talk
Which dot the evening's festive gathering,
Observing the social niceties,
And being the affable host and hostess,
You on one side of the capacious chamber,
I on the other.

Fleeting, I catch the twinkle in your eyes,
As you blow me a kiss across the room;
It brushes my lips
And, imparting to its ethereal existence,
The essence of deep affection,
I waft it back to you
On a passing beam of light,
You acknowledging its safe return
With the hint of a wink.
Knowing smile begets knowing smile,
Spirit communicates with spirit,
Both comprehending intuitively that,
Though apart,
We are one.

(“Togetherness”, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

819 **Out of touch**

Shocking! Who does she think she is? You'd think she'd dress in a style more appropriate to her age; I mean, she must be – well – that age, you know. The neckline reveals just a little too much bosom; and who, for goodness' sake, wants to see five inches above the knees of a woman of her age? In my grandmother's time older women wore ankle-length black skirts, neck-high black tops and matching black shawls. Proper order, say I ...

(From 'Live And Let Live', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

820 **An expert gets it wrong**

‘... But you do not have all the answers. Your qualifications and your experience are, of course, not to be minimised: you quickly spotted that this sunflower was in need of substantial help to enable it to heal. However, the treatment you have administered has, regrettably, caused the dear little thing even further, serious trauma. What the sunflower needs, my good fellow, is simply sun. It would, under the current climatic circumstances, have been an enlightened and felicitous strategy if you had elected to place it under a sun lamp in the green house.’

(From ‘The Little Sunflower’, story in *Oh, My Head!*)

821 **Only one thing worth having**

We seek to acquire many things in this life, particularly material things. And we also strive for supposedly higher values like fulfilment, good health, satisfaction, progress and success. But, when all is said and done, there is only one ‘thing’ worth having, and that’s peace of mind. This is not an absolute of course. Having the joy of a loving spouse and family, for example, is decidedly worth having; so also is a life of service to a worthy cause. What is really intended here is the notion that, if all else were stripped away from us, but we still had peace of mind deep inside where nobody could assail it, then fundamentally all would be well.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

822 **When things go awry**

Adrift in uncharted waters
In the dreaded dead of night,
I am naked, cold and all alone –
And countless miles off course,
No longer in delusion
That I’m in the right direction
And where I’m meant to be.

(From ‘Mayday!’, poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

823 **See Connemara – or experience it?**

*Then commune with the landscape, and savour its essence,
But leave no mark save the memory of your presence.*

What I have to say is prompted by my passion for the rugged and beautiful region of Connemara in the West of Ireland, but I imagine it applies to virtually everywhere, especially locations which are particularly attractive or have special meaning for us.

In a footnote to the poem ‘The River Nymph’, I wrote: *I love Connemara. So many people go ‘sightseeing’ in this mystical region but see little and experience less.* Looking at that statement with the benefit of hindsight, I realise that it could well be seen as supercilious. What I actually intended to convey needs clarification. For me, seeing the mountains, lakes, rivers, trees, the birds and animals and all that is to be found in the countryside means a lot more than just passing by and looking. To know the landscape in its fullness and splendour – sometimes palpable, sometimes subtle – I have to leave the road, take myself off the beaten track, and walk through Nature step by step, feel the rocks, grass, pebbles, twigs, the bog, the heath, the forest path beneath my feet, take in the sky, the clouds, the wind, the mists, the rain and the rainbows, absorbing the sights, sounds and smells all around me as I go. More than that, I need to walk with awareness, be attentive to the hidden essence of the wild, listen to the messages it might wish to impart to me, be willing to seek harmony with it rather than act like an unwelcome intruder, listen to its silence and its music – in a sense to become one with it; in short, to be a devout pilgrim to the countryside rather than a voyeuristic tourist. And, importantly, not to rush. Landscape does not understand time; it is the firstborn of creation, has been there for millions of years, and our frenetic twenty-first century pace, for which we were never designed, is out of step with its timelessness. When I engage with Nature in this manner, she touches me in ways I could not have foreseen and temporarily restores me to my wholesome primordial rhythm; then I will no longer ‘see’ the landscape, but truly experience it deep within me.

At this point, one might reasonably ask: is the process thus described difficult to learn and master? No, it is not. True, it takes time to develop a sensitivity to Nature's gifts, to become receptive to the spirit of the places we desire to know, but the process is simplicity itself. Head for the country and just bring three precious qualities with you: willingness, curiosity and respect. The rest will follow in due season. Don't set out to take in the landscape; aspire rather to let the landscape take you to itself, or, to borrow three lines from one of my poems:

*Let the countryside caress,
Feel the warmth of its embrace;
Let the landscape speak of love.**

Many years ago, in conversation with a friend, I spontaneously described Connemara as my spiritual home. I don't know where that notion came from but it felt right at the time. Now I know why.

Perhaps all this sounds esoteric or airy-fairy. Anybody who has come the route I have described will agree with me that it is real – and beautiful and worthwhile – beyond measure. So, to the sceptical, let me conclude with a suggestion which is composed of a simple twosome of words of which I have become rather fond, and which I have employed in a number of significant places in my writings: try it!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* From 'Love Is All Around' in *Yearning For The Horizon*.

824 **Remembering childhood**

When I was two years old, a friend of my father bought me a teddy bear, about eighteen inches high. It was a magical moment and, to this day, I can remember the details of the shop in which it was bought. I quickly developed a strong attachment to the toy and would confide all my secrets to it and tell it all my troubles.

(From 'A Gift Restored', story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

825 **A safe harbour – and unconditional love**

I often use this analogy: I am like a harbour. Now a harbour is a safe place, but from time to time it gets silted up, and if I don't dredge it, nothing can get in. One day, God is out in the bay with a huge freighter full of goodies for me, but says, 'Please dredge the harbour so that I can get in.' I respond, 'I thought your love was unconditional, but now you are asking me to use my dredger to clear out my harbour, before you will give me what you have for me. So your love is conditional after all.' With great patience and love, God replies, 'Who gave you the gift of the dredger? And who gave you the physical strength to operate it? And who gave you the instructions, the eyesight to read the and intelligence to implement them? As a matter of fact, who gave you everything you have and are?' I am deeply humbled. *Everything* I have and am comes from God, and all he is doing here is asking me to co-operate in his loving plan for my life by using the gifts he has already given me, *so that he can give me more*. This is co-operational love not conditional love and, on God's side, the love is infinite, steadfast and unconditional in the absolute sense of those words. Right then, to the dredger it is!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

826 **Lucille pontificates**

'Lucille! Be a good girl and cut the philosophical diatribe, will you. I was only admiring a few words of poetry, not seeking to provoke a highbrow homily on the quirks of human nature. Please do not pontificate so.'

'Oh dear! Was I pontificating? I don't usually.'

'Yes you were, Lucille; to a conspicuous degree actually and, in so doing, sabotaging the ambience of the moment during which I was experiencing, contrary to your assertions, considerable contentment and peace of mind.'

'I'm sorry,' said Lucille, contritely.

'Glad to hear it, old thing. All is forgiven, but don't do it again.'

(From 'Wishful Thinking?', story in *Life With Lucille*)

827 **Overspending**

... And even these hard currencies are pervasively
Conceding the comfort of their tangibility
To plastic cards and electronic transfers,
Leaving the overspending consumer to wonder
Whether he can really trust his finances
To faceless robots.
Handing over coin and note
Was a more reliable method of expenditure control:
You always knew
When you had none left.

(From 'Devaluation', poem in *No Rest For The Wicked*)

828 **Does God say 'Yes' to prayer?**

Some teachings state categorically that I should pray *only* for God's will for me. In that case does God ever say 'Yes' to specific requests? My experience has been that ... he will often do what I ask (but only when it is right for me or the person I am asking for). Why? Simply because I ask, because he is a giver, and that giving is born out of infinite, steadfast, unconditional love ...

So he gives because he loves. It's that simple. I used to think that I had to give God a reason for asking for something, which of course is complete nonsense.

Another aspect of this – and a disturbing one if we were to take it seriously – is that if the proponents of the pray-only-for-God's-will doctrine are right, then God's love is *conditional*: 'You can pray all you like, my children, but I will listen solely on those occasions when you pray *only* for my will.' When one knows God's love deep within, that kind of thinking is sheer garbage. Lovers don't talk like that to each other.

To be fair, there are occasions when this way of praying is the best option, but I much prefer the way Julian of Norwich sees it:

The best prayer is to rest in the goodness of God, knowing that that goodness can reach right down to our lowest depths of need.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

829 **Patience**

Just bought this notebook, see;
Now it must earn its fee,
Or else th'expense would be
 Unjustifiable.

But, though I strive to write,
All that comes out's pure shite,
And each successive verse,
Howe'er I try, gets worse.
The only attitude
Is one of gratitude
To my reclusive Muse
And give her leave to choose
 When she'll appear;
Then have no expectation,
Just pray for constipation
And wait for inspiration.

(‘Patience Is A Virtue’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

830 **Love comes a-calling**

I always considered you a bit standoffish,
And I only asked you out for a dare –
The lads put me up to it.
You said you'd think about it,
And later accepted.
I can still see the lads' faces!

I remember how beautiful you looked in the candlelight
At the intimate little restaurant where we dined;
I was surprised that I had never noticed before,
And you didn't seem a bit standoffish.
Early reserve put aside,
Small talk dispensed with,
We were soon absorbed in deep conversation,
Inattentive to the progress of the clock,
Until the waiter coughed politely
And said that they would like to close.

(From ‘Nothing Ventured ...’, poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

831 **Just say it**

If you are a writer, whether aspiring or practising, just show up on the page, the book said.* So here's the page, and here I am showing up on it. That's all very fine, but what is going to emanate from my pen remains a mystery. My mind, or what passes for it, is in one of those distressingly volatile states, and cannot come to rest on a particular thought for more than a few seconds. This is nothing new I might add, a circumstance which causes a lot of exasperating discontent, but that is another story. Hence, right now I have no fixed theme on which to expound, no idiosyncratic whim to indulge, no flight of fancy to transport me from the real to the imaginary, no hypothesis to prove, no theory to evolve, no project to undertake, no worthy goal to accomplish. In short, I've got absolutely nothing to say. Nothing.

But at least I've just said it!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* *The Right To Write* (1999) by Julia Cameron which, whether you want to write or are already writing, I wholeheartedly recommend.

832 **No cynicism for me**

I was sharing with an acquaintance recently, about three occasions on which I had been moved to compassion by people begging on the street, and that in addition to giving them a reasonable sum of money, I had made eye contact, smiled at them and said a few gentle words. In each case, they responded spontaneously in a way that indicated they appreciated somebody being kind to them much more than the money.

My companion made suitable noises in response, but looked at me in a way that nonverbally but clearly commented, 'Sucker!'

I saw no point in pursuing the matter further, but said softly to myself, as I left him: 'I'd much sooner be a sucker than a cynic.'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

833 **The only solution is to get to the root of it**

It had been a very trying week. My legs had gone all wobbly, buckling under me at the slightest exertion. It seems they don't want to carry me around any more, and when, sinking into a chair, I asked them why, they said that they'd really had more than enough of all this blasted emotional turmoil, and they're designed to withstand only a certain amount of that sort of nonsense. Legs, it appears, have their limitations, and they have more or less reached theirs. Not, mind you, that they are lacking in compassion or desire to continue their career in the transport business; it's just the nature of the beast, the characteristic of those parts of the anatomy as it were. They cannot, under the current regime, carry on being my main mode of conveyance despite an innate willingness to be of service. The only solution, they said, is to deal with the underlying cause – the constantly fluctuating emotions which are draining their energy supply.

(From 'The Proof Of The Pudding ...', story in *Life With Fred*)

834 **The purpose of coffee shops**

'It's no good, Lucille, I just cannot concentrate. The piped music's too loud, even though I asked them to turn it down. I'm afraid this story isn't going to get written – not today at any rate.'

'Pity,' said Lucille.

'It has never ceased to amaze me why all of these blasted coffee shops think that they must have piped music *de rigueur* – and often it's the radio with rock music and depressing news bulletins, or some idiotic chat show. You'd think they'd know their business a bit better. Everybody but a fool knows the main reason people come into coffee shops ...'

'... Do tell me.'

'To talk,' my precious, 'to talk, chatter, gab, converse, parley and gossip, also to read and write. The food and drink is merely an accessory to the conversation, scribbling and perusing.'

(From 'Talking Shop', story in *Life With Lucille*)

835 **A life on the ocean wave!**

All is turbulent on the surface of the ocean – stormy, choppy, often frightening. On the rare occasions when the water is as smooth as glass, it can seem eerie and unnatural and it never lasts for long. Moreover, in such becalmed conditions, like the sailing ships of old, I can make little or no progress; at best it is but a temporary respite and, at worst, an unwelcome delay in my journey. But in the depths, many fathoms down, mostly all is still and in perfect order. Even where there are currents, they have a clear direction and purpose. All is well.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

836 **The games people play**

I reckon that, of the nine [people who were at the dinner], there were at most two who really wanted to be there, and when we got home close to one o'clock this morning, I was exhausted from the small talk and the banal repartee. You know me well enough to know that I don't want to be serious all the time, and I like to laugh with the best of them. But I like to do this only when it is spontaneous and appropriate, not just contrived to make 'go with a swing' an evening that few of those present really wanted in the first place. Oh, the games people play!

(From a letter, December 2004)

837 **Fred and I are definitely not the same**

'Fred, old chap,' I asked, in a vague sort of manner that our French brethren might describe as *distrain*, their Germanic counterparts as *abwesend*, or that romantic Latin race as *distratto*, (one honours, does one not, one's membership of the European Union?). 'Fred,' I repeated, 'do you like word games?' I suppose I should know by now, but he is decidedly volatile and I can never be too sure of his viewpoint on things.

'That depends on the language ... I'm not into all that multi-lingual stuff that you go on with.'

(From 'Sweet Sixteen', story in *Life With Fred*)

838 **The importance of healthy self-love**

Diverted, by the dictates of the dictatorial
And the say so of the sanctimonious,
From the primal message
Of loving your neighbour *as* yourself,
You have ever loved your neighbour *before* yourself,
Become exiled from your core yearning,
Ignored the desires of your heart,
Interned your intellect in externals,
Neglected the temple of your body,
And given your spirit into slavery.

(From 'No Self Service', poem in *No Rest For The Wicked*)

839 **A deeper understanding of femininity**

I immediately realised that I was on the threshold of an understanding of femininity that I could not have imagined before.

A little while later, these reflections were laid on my heart: in its essence, femininity has little or nothing to do with gender; rather is it a sublime quality that is a blend of gentleness, compassion, nurturing, intuition, sensitivity and any number of other ineffable attributes which – in a very real sense ethereal in its wonder – is a gift from God, and it is an integral part of all of us, male and female.

In so many of us, however, sadly, it becomes buried under the personas we have had to evolve in order to adapt to the stern exigencies of the world in which we live, or gets hidden behind the façades we've constructed to shield ourselves from our insecurities, but it is *always* there. Happy the men or women who, no matter how long it takes, find it deep within themselves, acknowledge its immense value, and rest quietly in the tender embrace of its nurturing.

This understanding is not derived from a study of psychology, biology, anthropology or any other human discipline; it has long been contended – and this is widely known – that in every male there is an element of female and in every female an element of male. That is decidedly not what

I am talking about here. It is much rather a deeper, intuitive and, for me, breathtaking spiritual insight into the true nature of femininity which, as on so many occasions in the past, I simply cannot find the words to describe adequately. What I have written here goes a little way along the road, but it is a pale reflection of the reality.

Paradoxically, this does not invalidate the more traditional view of femininity – what I described in one of my poems as *A warm and gentle, elemental, non-judgemental woman*. The two perspectives can happily coexist.

The same, I imagine, may almost certainly be said about the true nature of masculinity, namely that it comprises sublime qualities and has little or nothing to do with gender, without invalidating the more traditional view. But that, perhaps, is for another time.

(From ‘Appendix I’, *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

840 **Beyond the illusion**

It will be clear to anybody who takes the time to become familiar with these poems that my profound personal experience has been, and continues to be, that what the world considers reality is mostly illusory, and the true reality is largely outside the intellect and past sense experience – is indeed beyond the illusion.*

(From the Introduction to *Beyond The Illusion*)

* For further treatment of this topic, see the essay ‘Reality And Illusion’ in my book *Reality And Illusion & Other Essays*.

841 **Those expectations**

I need to beware of expectations. If I have unrealistic expectations of myself, of others or of life itself, I will almost always be disappointed when they don’t materialise, and frequent disappointment leads to self-pity which I believe is at the root of all manner of trouble and perversity, and, of course, can be a big ingredient of depression. The higher the expectation, the harder the fall.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

842 **The music of love or the love of music**

The temptress, music, softly calls
When joy is nigh, when grief befalls,
Beguiles me with alluring strains,
Transported by a gentle breeze
That whispers low in apt intrigue,
A haunting, sweet refrain of love
To charm my wishful, waiting ear;
Enchantress playing a wistful air
On magic lute and harp and lyre
That weaves a spell around my heart,
That sets my very soul on fire.
I strive to stem the sorcerous wave
Before all's lost and I'm her slave.
Too late, alas! My mind's unhitched,
No sense to see,
For I'm bewitched!

(‘The Music Of Love’, poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

843 **Inner versus outer knowledge**

More importantly – particularly in spiritual matters – I have come to rely almost totally on knowledge (information) from internal rather than external sources. As an early philosopher, Lao-Tzu,* said:

There is no need to run outside for better seeing, nor to peer from a window. Rather abide at the centre of your being, for the more you leave it the less you learn.

A more recent philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson,† puts it differently, but the sentiment is the same:

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* The legendary founder of Chinese Taoism, sixth century BC.

† 1803–1882. American poet, essayist and philosopher.

844 **If flowers had feelings ...**

I am just pouring my second cup
When, on my table, the young lady places a vase,
Temporary home to one of the season's first tulips.
She adorns each neighbouring table
With its companions, newly arrived and colourful,
Yet something about their demeanour
Beckons to my eye and sense of compassion:
They are all drooping forlornly,
The stems no longer able to support the elegant blooms,
As if weary from a long journey
And bowed down with sorrow,
Ill-accustomed to their rigid glass receptacles.
Their presence is meant to enhance
The enjoyment of my short sojourn here,
But somehow they fill me with sadness.

(From 'Tulips', poem in *Hang On!*)

845 **Only one prayer?**

I know that the following proposition is utterly artificial, but I am using it to crystallise my thoughts. If I were to be limited, by My Beautiful One, to only one short prayer of petition for the rest of my life, what would it be? From the vantage point of where I am now (November 2004) this is it:

*Free me from the bondage of self, replace my weakness with your
Love, then let me not limit you in any way in each moment.*

Actually, I much prefer to express it as a statement than as a request:

*Thank you for freeing me from the bondage of self,
for replacing my weakness with your strength and for helping me not
to limit you in any way in each moment.*

And what if God were to confine himself to one answer? I believe it would be something like this:

*But of course, my love! Need you even ask? I long to give. All is
well.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

846 **Is spirituality practical?**

In moving toward a conclusion, let us ask a very reasonable question: of what value is all this in ‘real’ life? Spirituality is, in fact, intensely practical. One of its first fruits is emotional balance, that most desirable but often elusive state; then there’s the ability to deal with seemingly impossible circumstances when they arise; the discovery that, regardless of our circumstances, we are loved and cared about beyond measure; and, not least, the inestimable consolation of coming to know that life does not end at death.

(From ‘Higher Values For Our Children?’,
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

847 **Those diets**

I want a decent cup of tea, or some coffee better still,
And a batch of fresh-baked scones with jam and cream.
But all that I’m permitted is big bottles of cold water,
And a menu that would scarce sustain a flea.
An awful bloody diet, but I have to bloody try it
Since my health might well depend on its success ...

(From ‘Do Or Diet’, poem in *No Rest For The Wicked*)

848 **Just one message**

If I were at the end of my life and was asked if I had *one* message to leave to posterity (bearing in mind that I currently have no desire to teach anybody anything), based on my experience of the Divine during my lifetime it would be this: keep asking the God of Your Life to let you experience deep inside you, in that place where nobody else can access, the reality, the knowledge, of his infinite, steadfast unconditional love for you. When that takes place, nothing else will really matter and most of your questions will be answered or disappear. You will continue to be human and have pain and moments of confusion and doubt, but at the deepest level *all will be well* in the fullest meaning of that phrase.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

849 **Morning prayer**

Battery's pretty low this morning,
Sweetest One.
Finding it difficult to get up and running;
Perhaps you'd give me a kick start
With the jump leads ...

(From 'Kick Start', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

850 **The power of light**

A little while ago, I heard this interesting analogy of light versus dark: imagine a room is completely darkened, doors and windows are blocked up, no chink of light coming in anywhere. Somebody in an adjoining, brightly lit room gets a sledge hammer and breaks a large hole in the wall of the darkened room. Simple question: does the dark rush in and engulf the light, or does the light flood in and dispel the dark? The latter obviously and – equally obviously – because the light is so much more powerful than the dark. However, in those moments when I find myself in the completely darkened room, the darkness is absolute. That's why it can create the illusion of being more powerful.

(From 'Darkness And Light', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

851 **Music & metaphors**

I was ensconced one evening recently in the quiet backwater of my beloved study, listening to some haunting melodies on the hi-fi.

'Where would the world be without it, Fred,' I said wistfully as my favourite piece drew to a conclusion. 'Music is balm to the soul, calm to the heart, catalyst to the mind, coolant to the heated brow, oil on troubled waters and a can-opener to every conceivable emotion.'

With hindsight, I can see that I was waxing pretty lyrical with the metaphors till I got to the can-opener, but I couldn't think of any other way to put it.

(From 'Striking The Right Note', story in *Life With Fred*)

852 **God's love: unconditional and omniscient**

God's love for me is unconditional but it is not bestowed indiscriminately because it is also omniscient. I am in a state of being absolutely loved by him at all times but when it comes to experiencing his love in a concrete way, unconditional love does not mean that he satisfies my every desire. Indeed to give to me in the moment what would damage me in the long term would not be a loving act.

That is why, at times, I can feel abandoned by God. What is in fact happening is that his plan for my life is unfolding perfectly, but he's not doing it my way.

Putting it more simply, the parent refuses the child a sweet now because s/he knows that it will spoil the scrumptious dinner that will be ready in fifteen minutes. Because the child has very little language, all the parent can say is 'No sweetie.' The child doesn't understand, feels hard done by, so kicks and screams. Sound familiar?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

853 **A manifestation of the human condition!**

I s'pose I've gone and got it wrong,
Though I thought I'd got it right.
I tried to soar on eagle's wings,
But landed in the shite.
I invested all my inner self
With just one thing in mind –
To find the essence of the truth
Or something of that kind.
Oh sure, I reached my journey's end,
But things turned out a farce:
Truth didn't like the way I am,
So kicked me up the arse.
One wouldn't treat a dog like that –
'Twould bring the poor mutt to its knees.
One wonders, thus, with suchlike friends,
Who the fuck needs enemies?

(From 'Wrong Turning', poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

854 **Lightening up**

‘I was just thinking ...’

‘Delighted to hear it; commendable activity, thinking!’

‘Stop teasing, Lucille. I’m being serious.’

‘All right,’ she said, laughing; ‘but what were you thinking about? Do tell me.’

‘Only that thinking itself can be a very painful process depending, of course, on the subject matter. I have often wished I had a sort of psychic control panel on the side of my head where I could switch off distressing reflections and tortuous thoughts, or at least consign them to a state of suspended animation until I was better equipped to deal with them.’

‘My poor, dear writer, you really do take life much too seriously. Thoughts are meant to animate not consternate. Lighten up and enjoy life is my motto. Be like me: have fun, fun and more fun. We shall never pass this way again, you know. You won’t catch me ruminating like that.’

Lucille wasn’t entirely correct in her judgement of me. I enjoy a bit of fun with the best of them, a jolly good laugh, even a healthy guffaw at times; and, if you’ll pardon the humility, I am an accomplished raconteur. But the Muse of Muses had gone a bit over the top, I thought. Indeed, she seemed to be forgetting that she can have her serious moments, and it was not too long ago that I counselled her to lighten up a good bit ...

(From ‘Just Thinking’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

855 **The need to keep things simple.**

In the complex world in which we live, it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep things simple. More and more, however, this is what I need to do, particularly when I have to go through difficult phases and batten down the hatches until the storm passes. Indeed, at these times I need to keep it so simple that even a child might ask me, ‘Why are you keeping it *that* simple?’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

856 **What me – a poet?**

I remember the first time somebody described me as a ‘poet’. I nearly fell off my perch in surprise. I knew that I wrote what might vaguely be described as poems if one were in a generous frame of mind, but for some strange reason I had never considered myself a poet. The word sounded just a bit too highbrow – even pretentious – for me. Much more to the point, I knew precious little about poetic convention and cared even less about it. There were two reasons for this iconoclastic attitude. Firstly I found that a good deal of this convention, as I put it in one of my poems, *shackles the spirit and governs the mind and leads one to write in a manner confined*. Secondly, I perceived far too much humbug in most of the literary circles with which I had come into contact. It reminded me somewhat of the arrant, toffee-nosed nonsense people used to go on with about wine until market-led demystification finally permitted people to admit without shame that they were happy with a bottle of the house plonk. And most house plonk, they have discovered, is pretty good stuff. And most ordinary poetry (ordinary being defined as that which doesn’t measure up to what the poetic establishment considers of acceptable quality) is also precisely that – pretty good stuff.

(From ‘The Nonconformist’, essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

857 **What is an open mind?**

After due consideration, this is what I came up with:

Keeping an open mind does not mean that I accept everything; it means that I make a conscious decision – and a persistent effort – to be at least willing to consider everything. However, since an open mind can absorb anything and, even after careful consideration, there is a real possibility of soaking up ideas that are unhealthy for me, I need to post the sentry of wisdom at the entrance.

(From ‘Minding The Open Mind’, essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

858 **Expectancy versus expectation**

I saw these two terms used in the same sentence in a book I was reading recently, and the author assumed that the difference was clear. It wasn't, which left me to figure it out for myself, although I did have some sort of wordless intuition that I understood what was being said. Expectations, beyond the most fundamentally realistic ones, can be dangerous and I have written a number of pieces on this theme.* If expectations are unfulfilled, disappointment, disillusionment or even despair can follow.

Expectancy, on the other hand is merely a simple recognition that something is going to happen, and in every situation I encounter, something always happens! However, it may not always be what I expect. Put in a positive context, based on the knowledge that nothing in God's world happens by accident, expectancy is synonymous with hope. I can, therefore, aspire to go into every situation with hope but without expectation. I say 'aspire' because I cannot always implement this sagacious strategy. But I am doing the best I can, pretty well as a matter of fact, and, as always, it's progress not perfection that counts.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* For example, the poem 'Expectations' in *Grin And Bear It!* and 'Five Second Saga' in *Life With Fred*.

859 **Life's problems**

'You see, it's like this: the universe keeps throwing red herrings across my path in ever-increasing numbers, and I haven't a clue how to deal with them. What I mean is that it's virtually impossible to acquire the sensation that, despite the vagaries of one's daily existence, one has one's feet on solid ground. On the contrary, I sort of feel as if I am flailing and thrashing about a good deal in the deep end of the waters of life ... I think I may be mixing my metaphors there. Bloody semantics! I just don't seem to be able to find the correct expression.'

(From 'Deep End', story in *Life With Fred*)

860 **A writer dithers ...**

I think I'll pen a line or two
To pass some idle time,
But what I can't decide on
Is to write free verse or rhyme.
Okay, I'll be incisive
And make up my bloody mind
To choose and be decisive.
No, no! Nothing of the kind!
Oh hell, I'll write an essay
For verses oft can gall.
No, damn! I'll write in couplets;
Oh shit – won't write at all!

(‘Indecision’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

861 **Hearing, listening and being heard**

Hearing is mostly a passive process. I can be in a situation where my ears are not blocked, therefore take in everything, but if asked subsequently what I heard, am well capable, depending on how preoccupied my mind was at the time, of saying, ‘Nothing!’

Listening, on the other hand, is an active process, a skill which must be worked on to perfect, and the more important the situation, the more demanding it is on the listener, who must focus on every word that is uttered, the way in which it is said, and the accompanying body language. It can leave one quite exhausted.

Really good listeners are rare, because the best ones not alone bring the foregoing skills to bear on their listening, but also have profound empathy with and compassion for the speaker, and this they can offer only if they have personally come through the same territory, emotional or otherwise. The best listeners are also very intuitive. Such a listener is best identified when the speaker can say to him or herself, ‘I was truly heard.’ This kind of hearing is at the opposite end of the spectrum to passive hearing.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

862 **Not understanding my culture**

The longer I am around, the less, it seems, do I understand the culture in which I live. This is just a small example: I was on a two and a half hour train journey recently; at the stop after mine, a young woman got on. She was in her early twenties and was very attractive, not glamorous now, just possessed of a natural beauty. She wore no makeup and needed none.

Having observed her as above, I became absorbed in my book and didn't look up again for perhaps an hour or more, by which time she was putting the finishing touches to her makeup. Her fair eyebrows had become thick black streaks, an undergrowth of false eyelashes looked so heavy that they gave the impression that they would need scaffolding to keep them up, and her bright eyes had almost ceased to be visible behind the foliage. If it's true that the eyes are the windows of the soul, then nobody's going to find out much about hers whenever she puts on the camouflage. Her clear skin had disappeared under a layer of pancake batter, and the *tout ensemble* was rounded off by scarlet lipstick that made her look as if she had been attacked by a vampire. In short, when I first saw her, she looked as if she had just stepped out of a fairy story; now she looked ready to take a leading role in a Dracula movie. From picturesque to grotesque you might say. Why? Search me! Media and peer pressure probably, aided and abetted by the hype from the cosmetics industry. Such a pity.

Oh, and another one: women, who appear to be rational and normal in all other respects, will spend a king's ransom on designer jeans that have raggedy holes everywhere – well, almost everywhere. I mean, I just can't get my head around ...

Ah, look, I suppose I'd be better not to go there!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

863 **Just try**

If there is one thing you would get the Nobel prize for, it is trying. The absence of success is not the same as failure. In my perception, the only failure is the failure to try.

(From a letter, June 2005)

864 **Doubt**

‘Me? Doubt? Never! Well hardly ever. That is to say, sometimes. Oh, Tomas, you know how it is. Even the greatest saints had their periods of doubt, so what hope is there for an ordinary Joe Soap like me?’

‘Yes Joe,’ said Tomas, with an inscrutable smile, ‘I *know* how it is.’

‘But I am very fortunate. Life is not without its times of pain and turmoil, but I am a very blessed man.’

‘Yes, you are, David.’

‘I could not have got this far without your help, you know.’

‘None of us can do this alone, David. What I term “the philosophy of self-propulsion”, which is largely, though not exclusively, a product of western industrialised society, is alienating people from reliance on their fellows, and the original concept of community has largely been lost. But, by now, you have become aware of the value of your connection with your fellow men and women and have also discovered inner resources, which come from a power beyond you.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

865 **The reason for doing**

I am open to correction, but I think that it was Anthony de Mello who said that everything is done out of (sometimes enlightened) self-interest. For instance, people who give up everything to serve the destitute do so because it gives them a sense of fulfilment in one way or another. While I accept this view of things, I prefer to perceive it in another way ... One of the countless ways God loves us is to honour our need to do something worthwhile and fulfilling with our lives, to be ‘co-workers with him’, to use a phrase which I feel is inadequate but expresses it as best I can. Indeed, I believe that God chooses to ‘need’ us in this way, so that doing something worthwhile well is not so much self-interest as the ongoing result of the love relationship with God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

866 **The power of gratitude**

I was in conversation with a group of people a while ago. One of them started to complain about the quality of coffee that the café had served. He went on and on about it – over the top actually. When he had finished, there were a few moments of silence, then a man on the other side of the table said quietly: ‘At this very moment, while you are complaining about the quality of the coffee, somewhere in the world a child is dying for want of a glass of clean water.’ The coffee complainer went red in the face, said no more, and left soon after. From this I have learned just how important it is for me to be grateful for what I am and what I have, and what a wonderful positive quality gratitude is. I heard this once: *Don’t pray to have what you want; pray rather to want what you have.*

(From a letter, June 2015)

867 **So who needs a moral code?**

I was talking to a male friend recently ... who put the following point to me. If there were no moral codes, or people decided to abandon them, then it would be normal and natural for a man, because of his nature and physiological make-up to want many sexual partners – to satisfy what I have seen described in one book as the ‘imperious urge’. The implication was that since man has these sexual desires in a much more manifestly physical and urgent way than woman, then it is ‘natural’ for him to want to satisfy them.

My immediate reaction was a strong desire to say, ‘That’s a heap of shit and you know it!’ But I heroically managed to restrain myself. With a little reflection, I was able to offer, ‘Sex is only one of many appetites. If men were to allow themselves unbridled satisfaction of all of these, it would quickly lead to social anarchy and personal destruction. Self-discipline is essential to both survival and personal quality of life regardless of any external code of behaviour. As M. Scott Peck* said, ‘Self-discipline is self-caring.’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (1978).

868 **Slow learners**

‘Now, who’s jealous?’

‘Envious!’ I retorted, with the air of one possessing superior wisdom.

‘Let us not be pedantic,’ said Lucille, ‘or you will fail to learn the important lesson that the Universe has mapped out for you today.’

A wave of indignation surged up from somewhere in the pit of my stomach: ‘Lucille, would you ever go and f ...’ I stopped myself in the nick of time, coughed as my breath caught in the effort of stemming the flow of profanity, blushed profusely and started to perspire from the sheer trauma of nearly making a monumental blunder.

‘S-sorry, old thing. Whew! What nearly was, but thankfully wasn’t,’ I gasped. ‘Oh, Lucille, you uttered a mouthful when you said that jealousy is a powerful and destructive emotion. My goodness but I’m a slow learner. Oh dear, oh dear!’

Thankfully, Lucille wasn’t a bit upset by my behaviour. Now that I come to think of it, she smiled serenely throughout my entire performance and, being the wonderful goddess that she is, now proceeded to administer much-needed balm.

‘Take heart precious writer. You actually remembered what I said about the power of jealousy, but perhaps you have forgotten that I studied this stuff assiduously myself for many moons a couple of thousand years ago, plus refresher seminars at several Annual Muses’ Conferences, but the knowledge was of little use to me in the heat of the moment recently, was it? It is I who am the slow learner.’

Bless her!

(From ‘Life Is Difficult’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

869 **A further meditation on the human condition**

So, it’s this?

Oh, what bliss!

(‘Brevity Revisited’, poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

870 **God's timing in meeting needs**

Why is it that often, when I seem to be in dire, even anguished, need of God's action in my life, he seems remote and inaccessible? Surely the time for him to act is when *he* knows that I am in need. Then why the delay? It occurs to me that God often seems to act only at the eleventh hour so that our gratitude might be all the greater, and gratitude is in and of itself a gift. That feeling of intense gratitude for God's goodness is a wonderful experience. I note that I mentioned earlier that he often seems to provide an oasis only when I feel that I cannot take even one more step in the desert.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See my poem 'The Road Less Travelled' in *The Substance Of Dreams*.

871 **A great blessing**

Last weekend the entire family came home for four days for a reunion. There was no special event but they just all wanted to be at home with us for a few days – one of the many great blessings in my life. We had ten for dinner here on the Saturday night and sat at the table for nearly four hours, chatting, laughing, reminiscing; it was just wonderful.

(From a letter, August 2006)

872 **Humility!**

'Yes, but really, what does it matter who wrote it?'

'Of course it matters, Lucille. People aren't impressed if one can't give accurate information on the source. I mean if William Shakespeare, the noted poet and playwright, said it, it must be good, but if an unknown Ken O'Sullivan said it, the general public concludes that it's a load of tripe. I suppose,' I went on, ruefully, 'it's not the general public's fault that they don't recognise that what an unknown Ken O'Sullivan has to say is infinitely more important than anything William Shakespeare, the noted poet and playwright, came up with.'

(From 'In Search Of Excellence', story in *Life With Lucille*)

873 **The inner child**

I watch and wait in wonder
As a gleeful child, and guileless,
Roms barefoot through the grass,
Chatters to the daffodils
And winks at sheep that pass,
Listens to the song thrush
Whose tune he tries to match,
Climbs the tallest of the trees
To reach up to the skies,
Casts petals on the wafting breeze
And chases after butterflies
That he does not want to catch!
Totally entranced
By the magic of the moment,
No future and no past;
Far too long restrained,
Enchained inside of me;
Now, many years a-growing,
Unfettered,
Free to be
A little boy at last.

(‘Many Years A-Growing’, poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

874 **The Divine is within**

*The truth is that the treasure we seek
lies within our very selves.*

(Teresa of Ávila)

Pretty nearly everybody I know who has completed a significant portion of their journey has come to realise, in one way or another, that the fundamental idea of God – of the Divine, if you prefer – is deep down inside every man and woman. Thereafter, we seem to fall into two categories: those who, happily, can and do access it, and those who, for reasons which escape me, cannot – or won’t.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

875 **Once an atheist, always an atheist?**

What I have to say is the product of a lifetime of observation. There is neither criticism nor judgement here. And it's this: virtually all the convinced atheists that I have either met or heard/read about in the media were not open to considering the possible validity of theist arguments. As far as they were concerned, they were right and that was it. To be fair, a substantial number of religious people are just as rigid about their beliefs.

But were there no exceptions? Yes, there were. Firstly, there is a small but significant cohort of, mostly, scientists and philosophers who have come to the conclusion, by deduction from the evidence, that there must be an Intelligent Design behind the incredible complexity of Nature – what I have seen described as a ‘Pilgrimage of Reason’.* They do not seem to have encountered a personal God, however. On the other hand, I have met a considerable number of men and women who, when their lives fell apart and their backs were to the wall, had to find another way of being in the world – had to discover a personal, loving God who was interested in the tiniest detail of their lives – or else go insane or die. I am happy to report that, with appropriate help, many of them found it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Antony Flew in his book *There Is A God*, subtitled *How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind* (2007). See my essay ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’ for further comments.

876 **Fred and I accept each other a we are – sometimes!**

‘But that doesn’t mean’ continued my incorrigible companion, ‘that I can’t launch the odd tease, user-friendly sniper fire and so on, does it?’

‘Of course not, Fred. Life just wouldn’t be the jolly old same without the regular battle of wits with you, old soulmate. It goes without saying though that I reserve the same right to myself!’

(From ‘New Year’, story in *Life With Fred*)

877 **The pain/joy enigma**

‘... but something is puzzling me. Can I run it by you?’

‘Sure.’

‘As a younger man I thought one had to be either happy or unhappy. Now it seems that one can be happy and unhappy at the same time. Is that possible?’

‘Not alone is it possible, it is often desirable because, in our own joy, we retain active compassion by identification for those who have little or no happiness in that moment. It is, however, a happiness, or joy if you prefer, which is not generally understood by the world. Simply put, it comprises a knowledge, in one’s deepest heart, that fundamentally all is well regardless of appearance or circumstance. Sometimes, incidentally, we can mistake pleasure for joy. Pleasure and joy are two entirely different concepts. Pleasure is linked to material or physical stimuli. Joy, on the other hand, can be experienced even when the outer circumstances appear pretty dismal. This circumstance tells me that joy is internal but it is not trawled up from my own finite resources. I call all this the pain/joy enigma.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

878 **Healthy self-esteem**

‘A friend of mine, who is always rigorously honest and would not spin yarns about such matters in a million years, recently returned from his first business trip to Tokyo and told me that, because of the density of the population and the scarcity of space in that city, the ground covered by the imperial palace would, in real estate terms, be worth more than the entire state of California.’

‘No kidding?’ said Fred.

‘No Kidding, old buddy. The reason that I mention it is that this information opened up an interesting train of thought, in question format, to wit, ‘Is there real estate anywhere in the world that is more valuable than that?’ Now, here’s the significant aspect of it, Fred: I was able to respond, without a moment’s hesitation, that the space inside my mind

is by far the most valuable property in the entire universe. I doubt if you will find a more positive statement about self-esteem anywhere. All in all I must be pretty healthy in that regard. Consoling thought that.

‘... On doing a recent appraisal of the said valuable inner real estate [i.e. inside my head], I was dismayed to discover that I have, for what seems like light years, been giving free lodgings, in property that must be worth trillions, to a whole range of people who don’t belong there, from dictatorial pastors to misguided teachers and from wayward therapists to well-meaning but toxic acquaintances. Any estate agent worth his salt would be appalled. I mean look at the frightful inconvenience. I simply wish, let us say, to enjoy a quiet meander around my cerebral demesne, just to relax and gather my thoughts, but every few feet there is some intruder getting in my way, usually waving his or her hands frantically and repeatedly shouting old messages at me. I have heard them all a thousand times before, on top of which most of them are lies, so it horrifies me that I take them on board every goddam time as if they were superior wisdom, when I know well that they are unadulterated codswallop. But instead of telling these pests what to do with themselves in a few well-chosen four-letter words, I smile wanly, mutter something incoherent, and stagger along until I meet the next unwelcome visitor.

‘I mean to say, Fred, for a guy like me, who possesses top-quality self-esteem and a first-rate sense of his own identity, this is behaviour bordering on insanity!’

(From ‘Dear Old Pals, Jolly Old Pals’, story in *Life With Fred*)

879 **Prayer is ...**

We often speak of love, my love,
In a language without livery,
Neither syntax nor semantics,
With no finite words to fathom,
No tone nor tuned inflection
Which can mould misunderstanding ...

(From ‘Love Beyond Language’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

880 **Living in two worlds**

One of the significant aspects [of my beautiful spirituality] is that the world in which I live cannot satisfy to anything like the degree that it did beforehand. Indeed, with some exceptions, there can be a pervasive discontent with the temporal. Further, I often ask myself this question: how can you ever be satisfied with Earth when you have tasted heaven? So far, the only way around this dilemma that I have found is a) to acknowledge frequently that the things of this world are gifts from God, and b) to see death not as an end or a beginning, but rather a gateway. This enables me to see a more seamless connection between the temporal and the eternal, and derive some contentment from knowing that the gifts of this world are helping to lead me along an eternal path. I acknowledge in particular the gifts of my loving family and my loyal friends, of the wonders of Nature, of the nurturing of my writing and, of course, the gift of life itself.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

881 **The residue of a poetry masterclass**

To overwork similes is my avid intention;
You see, I despise most poetic convention.
It shackles the spirit and governs the mind,
And leads one to write in a manner confined –
A tragic surrender to usage that smothers
The gifts of creation, and strives to please others,
Who sit on the sidelines and make up the rules,
Pedants who take scribes like me for mere fools.
So, I'll overuse clichés and collapse all my metaphors,
Garnish my poems with indelicate letter-fours.
There are truly no lengths to which I will not go
To ruffle the feathers of those 'in the know',
For the greatest offence on my list of definitives
Is to make it a point to always split my infinitives.
In short, if decorum my writing obscures,
It's up theirs, and if you're one of them it's up yours.

(‘The Rebel’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

882 **This year, next year, sometime ...**

I am contemplating the prospect of completing my seventh decade on the planet in a few months, and am wondering, in bewilderment, how I got to be this age! What seems like only a short while ago I was in my late twenties. Now – *voilà* – three score years and ten.

There are still so many things I want to do. And why not? My spirit's as fresh as a daisy, my mind is hovering at thirtyish, and my emotions are spread fairly evenly over the first three decades of my life. So, tally ho and here we go! The sky's the limit ... But hold on. My body has just sent me a message that, all this exuberant youthfulness notwithstanding, it has reluctantly moved on, and has now asked me, in the light of its various creaks, aches, pains and energy limitations, to cool it. Damn it! *Sigh!* Never mind. Somehow the spirit will find a way. But maybe not in this dimension.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

883 **Gathering one's thoughts**

I was sitting there, musing, sipping a mug of hot extract of the ground coffee bean. Well, gathering my thoughts rather than musing, to be precise. Pretty difficult process gathering thoughts; perhaps you've noticed. Mine are anyway, or mine is – that is to say, my thoughts are, or the process is ... Oh, blast, who cares about syntax? You know what I mean, don't you?

As I was saying before I interrupted myself, they – my thoughts, that is – are rather like a bunch of unruly army recruits, not wanting to conform to any sort of discipline and continually doing their own thing. I gather one, then, triumphantly, a second, only to find that the first has gone AWOL again. On occasions all too rare, I manage to grasp two at the same time, but this could hardly be described as gathering one's thoughts. The latter comment is based, you understand, on the assumption that most people have more than two thoughts. I suppose that's reasonable, isn't it?

(From 'Shepherds', story in *Life With Fred*)

884 **Giving Lucille a break**

'Even Muses have their melancholy moments, I suppose.'

'Yes.'

'Bit unreasonable of us writers to expect you to be in top gear all the time. Just because you're a goddess doesn't mean that you're exempt from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune nor the ebb and flow of the tide of fate. A song from my youth said something about rain falling into every life, and who should know better than me? I'll have to be a good deal more considerate from now on.'

'Yes.'

'Anything I can do to elevate the jolly old divine spirits and lift the gloom?'

'Yes.'

'Er ... let me guess. Write you a sympathetic poem? No, not that. Sing you a lullaby? Well, perhaps not. How about a nice cup of cocoa? No, that's not it either. Tell you one of my side-splitting anecdotes? God, no! Perish the thought; even I couldn't stand that right now. Hold on a second, old thing, while I consult the inner source of wisdom ... Ah, got it: leave you to reflect in peace and quiet. You need to be alone with your thoughts right now, and my idle chatter, though well meant, is trying your patience and you need it like a hole in the head – right?'

'Yes.'

'Okay then, I'll shove a sock in it.'

'Good idea,' said Lucille.

(From 'Off Colour', story in *Life With Lucille*)

885 **What is guilt?**

Guilt isn't an emotion; it's a sickness. At the very least, it is an emotion that makes us sick. The only function it has is to alert us when we are going off the rails. Thereafter, with God's help, we set about getting back on track. When guilt sticks to us after that – as it all too often does, largely because of conditioning – it can best be described as toxic.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

886 **Management covers a multitude**

‘Management’ is one of those pliable words (‘communication’ is another example) which can be used to cover a multitude. Management is responsible for policy, planning, markets, money, machines, property, regulatory compliance and, especially, human resources – the list can include almost anything. Historically, whether the organisation was a two-person family business or a major world power, this responsibility has been exercised with varying degrees of success or failure, and in a variety of styles from the autocratic tantamount to dictatorship, to the democratic bordering on anarchy. The number of definitions of management are as numerous as the authors who write about the subject.

(From ‘Management’, essay in *In My Write Mind*)

887 **Early teenage**

So there I was, grappling with the rigours of life in a new boarding school, having been removed from my cosy home and friends in comfortable, anonymous, suburban London to a ‘valley of squinting windows’ in the Ireland of the 1950s, with my English accent, knowing nobody of my own age, having a father who was now the proprietor of a large business in a small town and a mother who, I later discovered, had not wanted to leave England. Something of a culture shock for a sensitive boy of barely fourteen years.

Two months later, my mother died.

(From ‘Seeing The Bigger Picture’, story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

888 **The importance of perception**

How we perceive ourselves and each other has an enormous impact on the quality of our communication. Indeed it colours virtually every social exchange between individuals and groups, and the more accurate and honest we can be in these perceptions, the better will be our relationships with others.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

889 **Want to write? Here are some suggestions**

- ✧ Don't wait for quality to materialise in your mind before putting pen to paper. Write the first thing that comes into your head. You can refine it later.
- ✧ Read your work aloud to yourself, and keep changing it until it sounds right *to you*. This is particularly useful with poetry.
- ✧ Write from your experience or imagination.
- ✧ Write from the heart.
- ✧ If *you* like the finished piece, it *is* good, regardless of what anybody else says.

(From 'Tread Softly', essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

890 **With apologies to Sylvester and Tweetie Pie**

I taut I taw a puddy tat,
I taut I taw a dog,
I taut I taw a crocodile
Dancing with a frog.
I taut I taw a chimpanzee
Conversing with a pig
And a fifty ton rhinoceros
(They always do things big).
I also taut I taw a wolf
And elephants by the score,
A flock of hungry vultures
Eating woodlice off the floor.
I told my lady wife all this
And asked, 'What do you think?'
She said 'My love, please tell me if
The elephants are pink?'
'Are you suggesting I've imbibed –
In short, that I am drunk?'
And as I looked her in the eye,
She turned into a skunk.

(‘Visions’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

891 **Down at heart, gazing into a river**

Rippling waters passing by,
Take the tear that moistens my eye;
Take it to your distant lair,
Withal the weight of my despair.
The anguish of my heart beguile
Unto your watery domicile,
To give the tear an apt release,
Then flow away, and leave me peace.

(‘Rippling Waters’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

892 **When is music music?**

I think I have said this in some context before, but it bears repeating: music is music only when you want to listen to it. When you don’t, it’s just noise. And when it happens to be music you wouldn’t like to listen to anyway, it’s a cacophony. That’s why I have an intense dislike of so-called background music. Even on the very rare occasion that I might like a musical backdrop, it’s always somebody else’s choice which seldom matches my taste. Particularly objectionable is the piped music, not infrequently accompanied by television, that one finds almost everywhere from shops to hotels and from airports to hospitals. Yuk! Actually, by far the best background music in these various locations is none at all. But when my heart wants to hear music, and I make the right selection, it relaxes my body, slows down my mind and, above all, nourishes my soul like a healing balm, some of it having the power to draw tears from the deepest part of me. That’s when it is truly music.

Miguel de Cervantes* once said, *Alas! All music jars when the soul’s out of tune*, and in the world in which we live, far too many souls are out of tune. Give us some quiet to realign them with the music.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* 1547–1616. Spanish novelist, poet and playwright. His best known work is *Don Quixote*.

893 **Most intelligent species?**

Humans have always been said to be by far the most intelligent species on the planet. I wonder.

Recently, I was listening to a talk by Sir Ken Robinson* on the way in which schools kill creativity, toward the end of which he quoted Jonas Salk, the American medical researcher and virologist who discovered the polio vaccine:

If all the insects were to disappear from the Earth, within fifty years all life on Earth would end. If all human beings disappeared from the Earth, within fifty years all forms of life would flourish.

Simply put, we are destroying the planet we have inherited, and at an alarming rate. Not alone that, but many factions of humans are destroying each other as well. Humans seem to possess a virtually limitless capacity for perverse behaviour, malignant ideology and hatred that I do not perceive in other species. Paradoxically, they also seem to possess a virtually limitless capacity for magnanimity, selflessness, sublime wisdom and love. The contrast is astonishing; the positives can be comforting, but the negatives terrifying.

For me, regardless of any dictionary definition, intelligence connotes the acquisition and application of knowledge *with a certain wisdom*. Clearly in the world's affairs, that is, for the most part, sadly and often tragically lacking. We may be the species with the most brain power. But the most intelligent? Nonsense! For which reason, I cannot resist quoting the first four lines of my poem 'Patience' in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*

*The Father gave us all free will
Without a trial run,
But took the risk we'd screw things up,
And that's just what we've done!*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* On www.ted.com.

894 **The importance of willingness**

Keeping an open mind. I used to think that if I was listening to somebody or reading something, that constituted keeping an open mind. Not so. I eventually discovered that, for me, it means not necessarily accepting everything, but being at least willing to *consider* everything in as unbiased a fashion as I am humanly able. If I don't do this, I may miss something valuable, or throw the baby out with the bath water.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

895 **Self-love**

Self-love, far removed from selfishness, is the essential foundation for loving others.

(From 'Fancy That!', story in *Life With Lucille*)

896 **Forgive and move on**

I know how upset you are (I'd be the same). For that reason you may not have been able to take in what I was saying. To be gutted by somebody else's words or actions, to say that your confidence is shattered is not something they do to us; *It's a choice we make*. We can choose to wallow in self-pity and misery, or we can forgive the person, pray for them and move on. Self-esteem comes from within, not from what others think or say about us. Do make the right choice; it's the only way.

(From a letter, May 2015)

897 **Simple prayer**

On mountain peak, in deepest dale,
In sunlight's glow, in shadow's vale,
No matter what my heart is feeling,
Whatever hand my life is dealing,
I choose, from thousands in my head,
The only word that need be said:
I call your name.

(From 'I Call Your Name', poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

898 **Spiritual directors?**

I have firmly believed for quite a while that nobody is capable of acting as a spiritual director for anybody else, even though this term and the attendant practice are widely used in religious circles. More recently, I have been reading how Saint Teresa of Ávila was caused grievous anguish by the well-meant but grossly misguided instructions given by some of her spiritual directors.

What I can aspire to is to be a spiritual companion to somebody. By this I mean that I may accompany a man or woman on his/her spiritual journey and, far from directing them in any way, simply offer the experience and insights that I have reaped from *my own* journey. They are then free to take what suits them and leave the rest aside, and I am freed from carrying the onerous burden of believing that I am to direct them in spiritual matters. As Teresa of Ávila observed:

We ought not to insist on everyone following in our footsteps, nor to take upon ourselves to give instructions in spirituality when, perhaps, we do not even know what it is.

Well said, Teresa!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

899 **It gets better and better**

... That all sounds depressingly negative and introspective, doesn't it? Navel-gazing they call it nowadays! But it's not all bad news, not by any means. Apart from the heavy stuff, I inherited a light-bulb sense of humour which can switch on in the darkest moments, love and compassion for my fellow human beings (which I discovered was greatly amplified by my own experiences) and many other gifts which modesty prevents me from itemising here! What's more, lest I appear to espouse austerity, spartan living is decidedly not my thing! I like my creature comforts. No mud hut and iron rations for me! ...

A rich inheritance indeed! As a matter of fact, in many ways my life is a miracle.

(From 'Rich Inheritance', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

900 **A place for everyone ...**

(Volkswagen means 'people's car')

Startlingly stunning Japanese girl,
Sitting in the back of a run-down Beetle –
She static and comely,
It stationery and crumbling –
Gazes, guileless, fetching-eyed,
Through the outbreath-misting window.
Rare oriental pearl
In an obsolete European insect,
Bulbous bug for carrying the commonplace,
Rusty relic of a curious cult;
Unfit receptacle for one so beautiful,
No vehicle to flatter loveliness.
A paradox that demands redress,
Yet right and proper nevertheless,
For though it is the ugliest object in sight,
And she the prettiest thing by far,
She is but a person
In a people's car.

(‘Folk’s Wagon’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

901 **Healing in Nature**

‘I was out with a group of friends last night, Fred. I don’t know where the heck you were; probably dossing in some remote, unused part of my brain as is your wont, so you will not have heard a remark made by one of the said friends. He has had a difficult time in recent years but has finally emerged into the light at the end of the tunnel. The reason I mention it is that I was rather taken with the linguistically innovative way in which he expressed himself on the subject. ‘I am now,’ he said, ‘able to savour the treeness of the trees, the seanness of the sea and the skyness of the sky.’ What a beautifully simple way to acknowledge the healing that surrounds us in abundance on this planet of ours.’

(From ‘Status Quo’, story in *Life With Fred*)

902 **Getting the wrong end of the stick**

‘Sex, my dear Lucille!’

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Lucille, shocked.

As any of my regular readers will tell you, I’m a pretty perceptive writer, as writers go, and I could tell instantly from her tone of voice, that my cherished Muse, whom I have had occasion to describe elsewhere as sexy, had got the wrong end of the stick.

‘No, no, dearest one, I was not making improper suggestions. On the contrary, the objective of my opening remark was merely to initiate communication along the following lines: you will surely have observed, in the course of your long career, that this pervasive and ever-present three-letter word is both fraught with fascination and pregnant with frustration.’ (With hindsight I can see that the word ‘pregnant’ in this context may not have been an entirely appropriate choice.) ‘This being the case, Lucille, it was my intention to proffer sex, indeed the whole realm of sexuality as a topic for intellectual discussion ...’

‘You mean, perhaps,’ she said, after but a moment’s reflection, ‘that, though obviously life’s *crème de la crème* ever since Adam first cast an amorous eye upon Eve, and though undoubtedly the bearer of great joy and ineffable bliss, sex can be a pain in the neck – among other places – when it fails us for one reason or another.’

(From ‘Present And Correct’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

903 **Despondency**

The Lenten Wednesday dawns, the priest prepares
The sombre ashen symbol to impart,
The faithful to remind that dust is dust,
And well ’twould be our sins to set apart.
Yet what of me? The ritual I ignore;
From custom, p’rhaps, I ought not to depart,
But scarce I need this token on my head,
When lifeless ashes weigh upon my heart.

(‘Burnt Out’, poem in *Voice Of The Man-child*)

904 **Why the prayer of petition?**

But why does God need to be asked? Surely he knows what we need already. Two reasons: God is the epitome of that beautiful quality, courtesy. He waits to be asked. Secondly, there is a clear correlation between the willingness to ask and the readiness to receive.

Experiencing God's love in the here and now will blow you away in the most transcendently beautiful way – beyond your wildest imaginings. So what are you waiting for? Go ask!

A final word: ask also for *patience* to wait on God's way and timing. We work incredibly hard for many years to win the world's fleeting, shallow accolades and questionable rewards. Give God a chance; don't give up after a short period of asking, no more than you would give up after one or two sessions in the gym if you truly wanted to get fit. Here is where perseverance pays. It is not a condition, for God's love is unconditional, but his timing is rarely ours.

Does God ever ask anything of us? Yes, but only this: to receive his unconditional love unconditionally. Apart from that one crucial thing, he wants nothing *from* us, only *for* us.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

905 **Soil and flowers**

This is a variation on a theme I cover elsewhere in the book. For many moons I have looked mostly at the soil and scarcely at the flowers, and that was a necessary focus since the soil needed careful preparation and tending, even though it was backbreaking work. Now it's high time to look at the flowers most of the time, for the purpose of the soil is to produce beauty, and the purpose of [difficulties] is – and has been – to produce miracles ... The soil won't go away; indeed if it did the flowers would die. But neither will the flowers go away for there are so many species and colours to give grace beauty and hope to each time of year. As I have often said: whether the many facets of our lives or the myriad flowers, all things come in their season.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

906 **The value of philosophy?**

I mean it was preposterous, Fred. The professor was telling us about some blokes in ancient Greece, Sophists or something like that – I’m not sure; anyway some bods from that era – who were concerned, to an almost morbid degree, with what *is*, presumably as opposed to what *isn’t*. Did you ever hear of such confounded tomfoolery? Any idiot knows what is and what isn’t. Imagine spending time trying to work it out, and, what’s even more astounding, making such a name for themselves in the process, that they become the flavour of the month in a university lecture all of two and a half thousand years later. Makes one think, doesn’t it?

‘Precisely,’ said Fred.

‘What?’

‘It seems to me that the major achievement of the various schools of thought down through the ages, has not so much been their particular philosophical preoccupations, intrinsically interesting and all as they might be; rather that exercising their minds in this way and passing the resulting conclusions on to posterity makes one think – and learning how to think must surely be a good thing.’

Loath though I was to admit it, Fred had a point.

(From ‘Philosophy Hands On’, story in *Life With Fred*)

907 **The inner resource**

I heard one of Ireland’s most beloved poets say a few years ago that, in the modern world, our power of impression is far more highly developed than our power of expression. The average person is constantly absorbing material, ideas, etc. from the media and other sources which daily bombard us (if we let them), but relative to that we put very little out. This struck a distinct chord with me because, at the time, I was going through a process (I still am) of realising that outside material, with some exceptions, was of less and less use to me. Increasingly, I am finding that almost everything I need is within.

(From a letter, June 2003)

908 **Lucille in flippant mood**

‘Right then, we have the first line: *Rules and models destroy genius and art*. Now Lucille, my sweet, you supply the second one, and make it learned and punchy.’

‘And literary critics make me fart!’

‘Lucille!’ I gasped, struggling to find words to express my astonishment, and realising, in dismay, that my dreams of producing a showstopper were disappearing like ice on a hot griddle.

She giggled: ‘Sorry about the learned bit, but you’ll have to admit it’s punchy.’

(From ‘In Search Of Excellence’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

909 **Parenthood**

In daily trial and tribulation,
With punctuated joy,
And all my love, though never perfect,
I try to be a parent to my children,
Well aware that I am trusted
With an awesome obligation:
The bringing of the coming generation
To a point where they no longer are dependent
On the ones who jointly gave them life at first.

(From ‘Who Do They Think I Am?’, poem in
Who Do They Think I Am?)

910 **Kindness to oneself**

For decades I stopped making new year’s resolutions because my experience was that I never kept them. I broke this pattern a couple of years ago, however, and made a resolution to be kind to myself. Not self-indulgent now; that, at best, adds little or nothing to my life and, at worst, can be destructive. I mean kind – treating myself with the consideration and gentleness, with the love, that I would show to a family member or friend in need. And am I in need? Yes. Always. Who isn’t?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

911 **Writing as a healer**

It is my hope ... that time has given you perspective on the turbulent and life-changing events in your life over so many years. Perhaps, if you have not done so, this perspective might encourage you to take up your pen again and find a special kind of nurturing in the writing. I don't know whether I shared this with you before, but it bears repeating I think. I keep my approach to my writing very simple: only one requirement and only one rule. The requirement is that my writing must nurture *me* (i.e. I do not write to please others). The rule is to write the first thing that comes into my head; I don't wait for 'quality'. I can refine later and the first thing I wrote may or may not appear in the final piece. With this simple formula I write almost every day; it may be only a few lines, or even a few words. I firmly believe that the writing has kept me sane.

(From a letter, December 2005)

912 **A father reminisces**

The children's eyes filled with tears of joy as I brought the beautiful story of Cinderella to its happy-ever-after conclusion. They hugged me, thanked me, said their simple prayers in front of the fire, and kissed me good night.

(From 'The White Rose', story in *In My Write Mind*)

913 **Growing old gracefully – some of the time**

'That's not funny, Lucille!'

The Muse of Muses was laughing heartily. 'Oh, shame on you; where's your customary sense of humour? The child only said "Look at the man with the white hair".'

'My hair is not white, Lucille, it's grey, and it's taken me long enough to get used to that. The insensitive infant obviously needs its eyes tested, probably its mother, too, because she said "Yes, dear." I hope she pushes his confounded buggy into the next lamppost.'

(From 'Term Of Endearment', story in *Life With Lucille*)

914 **Let the tears come**

This seeking heart's a task assigned,
The underlying cause to find:
A man full-grown of many years,
Yet often still immersed in tears,
The only way to deal with grief,
That time of peace and joy too brief.
But adulthood brooks no delays;
A man must cast off childish ways –
An all-too-obvious divulgence –
And may not yield to self-indulgence.
Yet, false, the world, too full of pride,
The weeping heart will oft deride;
And surely there must be a reason,
For all things come within their season.
Then, watchful Angel, always nigh,
Pray, tell the wherefore and the why.
The Angel answers, marked but mild:
"They're the unshed tears of a lonely child."

(‘Ask The Angel’, poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

915 **Little knowledge is good knowledge**

When I finally got to the point in my life where I realised that I knew precious little, I discovered that I knew all that I needed to know. For the little I know is indeed precious.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

916 **Am I an anachronism?**

... culturally, the greater part of me is stuck in a time warp in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Haydn, Puccini, Jane Austen, George Eliot, the Brontës and the like. Absent from the list, you will doubtless observe, are poets. For some reason, I never had much interest in poetry until I started writing the stuff myself about sixteen years ago.

(From ‘The Time Traveller’, story in *In My Write Mind*)

917 **Exam howlers**

- ✧ To be a bona fide traveller, you had to be three miles away from a pub before you were allowed to stop there.
- ✧ Thankfully, the Irish economy will be greatly busted by the tourism industry.
- ✧ The treat of inflation will decrease.
- ✧ I think perhaps the climate does attract foreign tourists. They can't believe it's so bad so they come to find out.
- ✧ Tourism is for pleasure for more than 24 hours. You have to admire their stamina.

(Student exam howlers from *Toorism I Think!*)

918 **Save us from the likes of these ...**

We've got it right, you've got it wrong,
Our doctrine is the only one
Uniquely picked to give the world a spiritual sensation,
For we have got a stranglehold on godly revelation.

(From 'Tunnel Vision', poem in *The Power Of Light*)

919 **A good attitude – but it wasn't easy**

The news broke early that year [1972] that the family business was in serious financial difficulties because of the troubles in Northern Ireland. It finished up in liquidation in 1974 and we lost almost everything.

It is not surprising that most of our friends disappeared like greyhounds in pursuit of hares. Some even spread malicious rumours about what we had done with all our money – Swiss bank accounts and the like! Liquidations weren't frequent in those days, unlike the years to follow, so it was, understandably, a real talking point locally. Fortunately for me, I didn't develop any resentments about it all; I just accepted that this is the way the business world was. But it wasn't at all easy, and there were many sleepless nights.

(From a letter, August 2016)

920 **Prudence and sound judgement**

I need to keep an open mind, but post the sentry of wisdom (my higher power's) at the entrance to make sure that I don't take something on board that is unhealthy for me. I need to be particularly wary of a whole range of seductive self-help methodologies and belief systems out there that promise major transformations or instant healing, but would actually be dangerous and destructive for me.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

921 **What goes round ...**

Our four children range in age from thirty-three to thirty-nine. Last Christmas ... I was having a chat with my daughter, and the discussion came around to one of her brothers who had just been appointed to a senior executive position in a major corporation. We both agreed that he is commendably unassuming, even humble, about his success. I then said, 'Humility is one of his virtues, one of his many virtues actually. As a matter of fact, the four of you have many virtues.' Without hesitation, my daughter looked me in the eye, smiled and responded, 'We got them from you and Mum.'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

922 **Chocolate!**

'Get thee behind me, Satan!'

'Now is that any way to speak to a lady?' came a soft, familiar voice.

'Crumbs, Lucille! You gave me quite a start. I had no idea that you were on my wavelength at present, but now that you are, I hasten to explain that I wasn't addressing you, my sweet, rather the box of chocolates on the coffee table. My son inadvertently left it there, open and alluring and for the last few minutes, every praline and fondant has been doing its utmost to seduce me into an orgy of calories. Temptation rampant, in other words; and me on a strict diet!'

(From 'Temptation', story in *Life With Lucille*)

923 **Helpful, that's me**

The stories may be read at random, of course, but a good number of the stories make sense only in the context of an earlier one. Where appropriate, I have given cross-references in the footnotes to try and make the collection more cohesive, but these can be totally ignored without detracting from the readability of the collection. Come to think of it, the entire volume can be ignored without detracting from anything ...

Appendix II is a list of the stories in alphabetical order – a study aid for future generations of your family when my work will be featured on the Leaving Certificate English course.

(From the Introduction to *Life With Lucille*)

924 **Oh no, I gotta write!**

I feel a poem coming on,
Oh no, a poem's coming on,
Like a pressure in my brain,
Inner tyrant who must drain
All the inspiration, sheer creation, stored inside my head,
Like a vampire who must suck my blood till I am almost dead.

I feel a poem coming on,
Oh dear, a poem's coming on,
Gives me ne'er a moment's peace
Till I shed the golden fleece
Of all I feel, of all the zeal the inner search can find,
Till every dot and every cross are wrested from my mind.

I feel a poem coming on,
Oh hell, a poem's coming on,
An apt verse I can't repress;
Hence, I'm driven to express,
Lest holding back or changing track, I abdicate control,
Refuse to give the poem life, and lose my very soul.

Sigh!

The words are all writ down at last.

Oh God, thank God, the fever's passed!

(‘Virus’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

925 **An important comment on much of this book**

There is always the possibility that people might discount much of what I have written ... Were they to do so, however, they would be overlooking one crucial factor: I have repeatedly stressed that words and the finite, human intellect are highly inadequate to express most of what I deal with in these pages. The true and stupendous beauty of what I am attempting to describe here actually cannot be recorded, only *experienced*. Furthermore, I am not trying to convince anybody of anything. This is but an account of a personal journey which almost daily amazes me.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

926 **Lucille meets Fred**

‘Lucille, I’d like you to meet Fred, my psychic sidekick. Fred, this is Lucille, my esteemed Muse.’

I won’t bore you with details of the encounter, if for no other reason than I wasn’t a party to it. I had forgotten to reckon with the fact that both of them hang out in my subconscious, a region to which I have only very limited access. So apart from an (in my view) over-cordial ‘Thrilled to meet you, my dear Fred’ and a sickening ‘You are a delightful and beautiful lady’, I didn’t glean very much of the proceedings. Suffice it to say that, from what I could gather, all was sweetness and light, and they got on like a house on fire – platonically, so I am assured.

(From ‘Red Herring’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

927 **Creating illusion**

This doesn’t prove anything, but I once, as part of a creative writing workshop I was developing, took one of my own poems and wrote two critiques of it, one a scathing criticism and the other, unreserved praise. Both looked equally valid! Interestingly, the poem – which I had selected at random – was entitled *Illusion*.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

928 **Only one wish**

‘What, queried Fred, would you ask for if your fairy godmother appeared and granted you three wishes just for yourself?’

‘Fun, frolics and fantasy, old buddy, or do you want me to be serious and for real?’

‘Dead serious and absolutely for real.’

‘In that case, I will need to reflect ... Right! Well, I would thank the kind, fairy lady profusely for her offer of three wishes, and tell her I wanted only one.’

‘Have you gone out of your mind – at least, have you gone out of your portion of our mind, throwing away two whole, entire and unwished wishes?’

‘Be quiet, Fred, please. I haven’t finished. One, as I say, wish is all that I would want, namely to have, at all times and in all circumstances, that most desirable and elusive state: peace of mind. Once you have that, you don’t need too much else.’

‘A fat lot of good that would be if you were despairingly destitute, chronically depressed and fearful of dying,’ scoffed Fred.

I could see clearly that the poor sap had missed the point. ‘Fred, my esteemed but myopic old half-brain, if I was despairingly destitute, chronically depressed and fearful of dying, I wouldn’t have my peace of mind, would I?’

(From ‘Piece Of Mind’, story in *Life With Fred*)

929 **Just a yellow rose**

The yellow rose I bought for myself has now been in its single-stem vase in my study for eleven days and is still blooming delightfully. Most roses I have bought in the past wither in less than a week. This one seems to like my company!



Incidentally, my yellow rose in its single-stem vase is nearly four weeks old and still going strong!

(From two letters, October & November 2003)

930 **Good self-esteem**

The only writers' workshops I have ever been to that nurtured and enlivened me were the ones I used to present to others over a period of years. They were designed mostly for beginners or relative beginners and were offered as a module in a wider course on communications. Regrettably it was physically impossible for me to be a participant at my own workshops or else I would have been the first to sign up!

(From 'Tread Softly', essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

931 **Fred's a bit confused**

'Today is our wedding anniversary, Fred.'

'Gosh, so it is. I'd completely forgotten; very remiss of me. How long have we been married?'

'Not us, you goon! My good lady wife and I.'

'Oh yes; of course; silly of me; getting a bit absent-minded. But hold on a second; if you're married to her, then I must be too.'

'Nonsense, Fred! She didn't know you existed when she married me, so how could she be hitched to you? You surely know all that stuff about full knowledge, free consent and so forth? What's more, no woman in her right mind – whatever about several husbands in a lifetime – would ever marry two men at the same time.'

(From 'Happy Anniversary', story in *Life With Fred*)

932 **Personal responsibility**

The modern 'Liberal' school of thought ridicules those whom it condemns as conservative, square, old-fashioned, prudish, puritanical, even religious. The trend is to reduce moral thinking and behaviour to the lowest common denominator and induce guilt in those who might otherwise combat what is often held out almost as a god: the so-called right of individuals to do whatever they like, and the denial of personal accountability for their actions.

(From 'Ethics' in *Communications – A Course Manual*)

933 **What is a mystic?**

As a younger man, as far as I can remember, I thought that a mystic was a rare sort of human being, possessed of esoteric spiritual gifts unavailable to most people and to whom lesser mortals might look for spiritual guidance or even enlightenment. Now, I am convinced that a mystic is quite simply a man or woman who is irrevocably, passionately, 'hopelessly' in love with God.

Using this definition, one may conclude that there must be millions of mystics, spread all over the world. I'm one of them. And it all came as a sublime gift.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

934 **Beyond language**

A language you speak,
With no phrases to seek,
That I understand.
 I speak a tongue,
 With no idioms among,
 That you understand.
Inert credibility
Brings love in tranquillity,
No speech to profess.
 Flawless inflection,
 Unerring connection
 In silence, no less.
Yet my verse is in vain
For I strive to explain,
But no words can express ...

(‘Superlanguage’, poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

935 **Why did God make us?**

We can add nothing to God's glory, but I believe that we can and do add to his joy; else why did he make us? By the same token, we can also add to his sadness.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

936 **Discouragement**

I once heard a story of a young couple who got lost in a dense forest and it started to pour with rain. In a very large clearing they came across a gigantic, red warehouse, so they ran toward it but were not sure if they would be welcome to step in and take shelter. However, the rain was so heavy that they decided to take the risk. When they went in, they were astonished to see hundreds of little devils running to and fro taking things out of boxes. Immediately they realised that this was where Satan stored all his stock-in-trade. Everywhere there were boxes stacked high and each one was labelled with its contents: Pride, Greed, Lust, Anger, and so on. However, what most struck them before they left – and they didn't stay long – was that about 80 per cent of the boxes were labelled Discouragement. They decided it was safer to go back into the forest and get wet!

(From a letter, October 2004)

937 **Nice adjectives please!**

'I say, Lucille old thing, I don't want to complain or appear to be unappreciative of your sterling efforts on my behalf, but aren't we sort of overexposing "nice" a trifle? The notion occurs to me that if you were to potter around the vast universe of your mind and I were to institute diligent searches in the vast universe of mine, particularly those regions that have lain dormant for a while, we might stumble upon a more stimulating adjective.'

(From 'Think Big', story in *Life With Lucille*)

938 **Will we ever change?**

Sadly ... history shows that every time God blows the winds of change and renews and refreshes his people, it is never long before men and women gets their hands on the newness and pervert it to their own ends, often erroneously believing those ends to be God's will.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

939 **Those speeches**

The honoured guest went on and on
When she was asked to speak,
And, seated in her line of view,
I scarce could vent my pique;
See, I had had a tiring day
Attending at the seminar,
And needed no prolonged address,
But you know how chatty women are.
Her words renounced their single state
And donned a constant drone,
A little like my better half's
Long marathons on the 'phone.
To tell the truth, I'm being unfair,
Her speech was not verbose,
But I was cloaked in lassitude
And almost comatose.
Yet breeding fosters etiquette;
I vowed my code to keep,
And stay awake whate'er it take –
Then promptly fell asleep.

(‘Losing Battle’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

940 **Respect for others’ spirituality**

It is not just a matter of tolerance and courtesy that I respect other people’s religious beliefs/spirituality, but it is an essential ingredient in the growth of my own relationship with God. In a way that I don’t fully understand, it seems that when, in the privacy of my heart, I give people the freedom to be who they wish to be, I open a channel for my own spiritual growth. Even on rare occasions when people try to indoctrinate me with their ‘rightness’, I can still respect their beliefs, but have to say a clear ‘no’ to any attempts to push them on to me. Interestingly, I have realised in recent times that, often, ‘no’ can be said as effectively, even more so indeed, just by staying silent.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

941 **The right motivation**

It is, of course, okay to do nice things for other people, but it's my motivation that counts. I find it's wrong for me to be a 'Mr Fix-it', that is, assuming I know what is right for other people and doing it – when, mostly, they are quite capable of doing whatever it is for themselves. It is good for me to remember that, much of the time, I am not sure what's right for me, never mind what's right for others.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

942 **Pleasure versus joy**

Pleasure and joy are two entirely different concepts. Pleasure is linked to material or physical stimuli. Joy, on the other hand, can be experienced even when the outer circumstances appear pretty dismal. This circumstance tells me that joy is not trawled up from my own finite resources, but comes from My Beautiful One.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

943 **The humility of the writer**

Of course, all this accounts for the fact that I'm not famous. I simply will not pay homage to the God of Humbug, who then refuses to admit me to the writers' hall of fame. However, you may be among those of my readers who will assert that the real reason I haven't made it big is that my stuff is a load of garbage. Well if that is what you think, so be it. I fully respect your right to hold and express that view. Indeed, your opinion could be spot on and I might do well to reappraise my philosophy of writing, perhaps even going so far as to overhaul my entire *modus scribendi*. There you are, you see. I'm not sensitive; well able to admit the possible validity of a critical evaluation of my work, then consider that evaluation objectively. And the thought of telling you that you're too stupid to recognise genius when you see it or that you're an illiterate asshole never even crossed my mind.

(From 'The Nonconformist', essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

944 **Success?**

To me, the only meaningful measure of ‘success’ is the degree to which my will (wish) is one with God’s or – the way in which I prefer to express it – the degree to which my love is in union with his. In the finite world in which we live, however, I perceive that entities or concepts are only measured in relation to their opposites. Therefore, one can only judge something to be successful if one is of the opinion that there is the potential for failure, however discerned or measured. God, in complete contrast, neither measures nor judges me and, in his eyes there is no failure. With infinite love and compassion, he sees me fumble and stumble and fall, but not fail. This being so plainly the case, ‘success’ is a redundant concept.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* This theme is expanded in a full-length essay ‘Success And Failure’ in *Reality And Illusion & Other Essays*.

945 **Love at first sight**

Arriving at the registration desk, I beheld this stunning vision in a yellow mini-dress. She smiled at me, greeted me most graciously and, although I was a little late, made me feel completely at ease by her pleasant manner. There and then, I was a lost cause.*

(From ‘Time To Tell’, story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

* This is the first paragraph of my favourite story.

946 **Worth waiting for**

A laugh is more than wisdom to the wise,
A gentle smile no fear or hate can own,
A tender touch means more than all advice,
A single word can say, ‘You’re not alone.’
A laugh, a smile, a touch, a single word:
Firm evidence of love – its human face,
But love will bide its time and, in the end,
All evidence of love with Love replace.

(‘In The End’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

947 **Music can be emotive**

‘Recently, Lucille, I was in the company of a lady of my acquaintance in a coffee shop of my acquaintance, and I was dispensing ample measure of wit and wisdom, as is my wont – between sips, you understand – when I realised that she was no longer among those present, metaphorically speaking that is. She was still sitting opposite me at the table but it was clear, even to the most casual observer, that she had suddenly acquired that vague, faraway look in her eyes, the sort that the French describe as *distrain*, and that she wasn’t listening to a word I was saying.’

‘Her loss,’ observed Lucille.

‘I dare say you’re quite right as usual, esteemed Muse, but that is not the point upon which I wish to dwell. The lady in question is the epitome of good manners, and a few moments later, she returned to the same planet as me and apologised profusely for being so inattentive. It appears that the purveyors of background music had chosen a number which had struck a distinctly nostalgic chord with her, and she had temporarily departed this world, well my segment of it at any rate.’

(From ‘The Soul Of Discretion’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

948 **The sheer intensity of God’s love**

Consider: if God were to let us experience the full intensity of his love here on Earth for just five seconds, I believe we would not be able to stand it.* We are not ready, simply not ready. It is like coming out of a darkened room after many years; we would not be able to stand the sunlight; it would take a time of adjustment. Even when we are used to the light, no one can look directly at the sun for more than a second or so, and the sun is but like a tiny firework when compared to the incredibly brilliant sun of God’s love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* This, perhaps, is what is meant by the words of God to Moses in Exodus (33:20): ‘But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.’

949 **Acceptance my arse!**

I'm here in the endless desert, God,
And I am practically delirious,
'Cause I've lost my bloody way again,
Only this time it's more serious:
I've lost the compass,
I've lost the map,
The camel's fled,
No well to tap,
All hope is dead,
The sun is high,
My skin's raw red,
And death is nigh.
The vulture gloats
At his coming meal,
You'll have to admit
It's a damn raw deal
(For me not him!);
And the worst of it,
(I tell no lie),
Is that *you* have left me
High and dry.
A question, then:
For fuck's sake, why?

(‘The Questioner’, poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

950 **Don't have to go to every party**

How I admire and applaud your victory over the ‘party delusion’ – one to which I am also subject. For me, it runs like this: It's nice of them to invite me, they are old friends/acquaintances/whatever, it's courteous to be sociable, it's anti-social to be a ‘loner’ on such an occasion. Therefore, for these and a thousand other hollow but highly plausible-sounding reasons, the right thing to do is conform and go.*

(From a letter, November 2005)

* This theme is taken further in the story ‘The Time Traveller’ in *In My Write Mind*.

951 **More than one way of knowing**

Others, Carl Jung and Eligio Stephen Gallegos among them, have written about the four ways of knowing, namely via the intellect, the feelings, the body and the spirit (these are my words but they effectively reflect the same analysis). I would like to add a fifth way: holistic knowing. Others have probably written of this but I have not yet come across it. Of its very nature, holistic knowing is difficult to describe; it is when the four other ways of knowing combine and are then infused with the all-embracing presence of the Divine. The result is a few moments of transcendent awareness in which everything becomes crystal clear. If one were to speak while experiencing holistic knowledge, it might be simply to say, animatedly, ‘Yes! I know!’ If a bystander were to query, ‘What do you know?’ the response could only be, ‘I know; I just know!’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

952 **Not receiving a compliment graciously**

‘May I remind you that, in your essay “Compliments and Self-Esteem”, you clearly lay down the ground rules for accepting compliments, all good sterling stuff, no doubt about that. Yet here you are, when I confer a heartfelt accolade on you, shilly-shallying and pussyfooting about the place like a short-sighted and knock-kneed chimpanzee with spasmodic amnesia. A dire display of double standards. Sickening, that’s what it is!’

(From ‘Stock-in-trade’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

953 **Responsibility**

‘There is a strong vein of belief – bordering on a cult – in modern society that states “I can do whatever I want.” Regrettably, many people do not discover the other half of this philosophy until it is too late: “providing that I am willing to take the consequences.” Even the tiniest pebble dropped into the greatest ocean creates a ripple. Every word I utter, every action I take has a consequence.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

954 **Union with God**

Oneness (union) with God does not mean that I lose my individuality and become subsumed into a sort of gigantic, amorphous, spiritual organism. Rather does it mean that the unique personality and integrity which are God's gifts to me find their ultimate expression and fulfilment when my will (my 'way' to use a term I prefer) is one with his.

In fact, my earlier, unenlightened view of who I am consisted in reality of a composite of façades, ego images, inherited perceptions and conditioning. I now see that it is only when I am one with God that I can be truly me – free to be the unique individual he created me to be. Indeed it is my experience that the more I am becoming one with God and with my beloved ones, the more I and they are becoming unique and whole individuals, and the more I see the unique wonder and beauty of God. By purely human standards, this is utter paradox, even contradiction. But, while God always honours our humanity, he operates in a realm that far transcends humanity in a way that is far beyond my limited powers of expression ...

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

955 **Life's like that**

Monday happens once a week,
There's no escaping that.
Tuesday takes a hefty toll;
By Wednesday I've gone flat.
Thursday drags – my spirit sags
'Neath heavy loads and vast,
But all's not lost – and thank you God –
For Friday comes at last.
On Saturday I do my thing,
Then take a rest on Sunday;
But the good of it is all screwed up
By another bloody Monday.

(‘Weak End’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

956 **Self-esteem**

But now that you've brought me
These many long miles,
As clear as the stars, I can see
That, far from the second-rate being I thought,
And farther from third-rate ideas that I bought,
The pearl of great price is me.

(From 'The Pearl Of Great Price', poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

957 **Time the tyrant**

'Time is a slave-driver, Lucille, a despicable tyrant!'

'A tyrant? In what way? That sounds like the essence of an interesting piece. You might need my services.'

'Actually I was just moaning about the many ways in which I am a slave to time, but now that you mention it, it does have possibilities, doesn't it? I mean to say, the blasted thing is so addictive. All too often, during any given day, I look at my watch when I don't even need to know the time. It probably has to do with the fact that my work is divided into one-hour time slots, and one has to keep a careful eye on the progress of the clock. But take today: day off, no timetable, no plans or anything; ideal ingredients for a laid-back, go-with-the-flow meander through the twenty-four hours, but I keep checking the blasted time. All of which leaves me with one heartfelt desire: if I make it to the hereafter (no, let's think positive: *when* I make to the hereafter), I hope there are no clocks, watches or timetables. It has been said that when God made time he made plenty of it, in which case there shouldn't be any need to measure it, should there?'

(From 'Time The Tyrant', story in *Life With Lucille*)

958 **What communication is**

Communication: the art of making sense to others but, more importantly, to oneself. And the golden rule of communication: keep it simple.

(From 'Introduction' in *Communications – A Course Manual*)

959 **Genesis of a novel**

A few years ago, having read Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, I identified a strong desire to write a novel that would leave the reader feeling uplifted and with the clear impression that there is more going on in the world than we are picking up with the intellect and the senses – that there is another dimension. I felt, however, that this was a tall order and, despite my best efforts, I couldn't come up with any ideas for a story line. Eventually, I decided to write off the project. 'There's no novel in me,' I said to myself.

A short while later, on a crisp December morning, I was walking on a favourite beach in the West of Ireland, and my writing was the furthest thing from my mind. I was simply savouring the seascape, the birds, the mountains across the bay and the winter sunshine. Out of the blue, the novel came to my mind, and by the time I got back to my car, an hour later, I had mapped out the entire story in my head, had mentally written the opening and closing passages, and devised much of the linking detail. I put some additional touches to it during my drive home, and by the time I went to bed that night, I had written over four thousand words together with fifteen hundred words of notes for later expansion.* Now I understand what Albert Einstein said:

The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery. There comes a leap in consciousness, call it intuition or what you will, and the solution comes to you and you don't know how or why.

(From a letter, December 2012)

* The completed novel (*Black On Magenta*) runs to c. 102,000 words.

960 **Limitations of language**

I have expressed this thought in several places in my writings, but it so significant that I will give it a home of its own here: when one experiences deep within oneself, then attempts to describe, the spiritual realm, language, beyond giving a pale reflection of the reality, is of very limited value.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

961 **What do adults lose on the journey?**

What pearl of great price
Did the infant possess
That the adult has, unheeding, mislaid?
What secret of vibrant presence
Did the little child comprehend
That the man has long since forgotten?

(From 'Full Circle', poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

962 **Fondly remembering an old family retainer**

She had always been old; always needed to be because she was one of a dying breed of old family retainers, and old family retainers are, of necessity, always old. But somehow she never got any older; she was always, well, just old ...

We never exploited you, as was often the case in those days. You were looked after as you wished to be looked after. Looking back, I know now that we loved you dearly and wanted more for you, but money, conditions, short working hours and plentiful perks were not your motivations – didn't turn you on, to use a modern idiom. Indeed, we used almost have to push you out the door on your day off, for all you asked of life was the liberty to serve as you wanted to serve, for as long as God would grant you the strength. Self-indulgence and clock-watching were about as alien to you as an overall suntan is to an Eskimo.

(From 'Old Lena', story in *In My Write Mind*)

963 **Pessimism**

Another day is in recess;
'Twas yet again a bloody mess.
Good night, let all your cares be sparse;
'Twere best to stick them up your arse,
For morning, with the selfsame grit,
Will doubtless yield the selfsame shit!

(‘Repetition’, poem translated from the German in
Save Us From The Well-meaning!)

964 **Acquiring humility**

I cannot be sure that I was ever specifically taught this, but I certainly picked up the notion that the way to humility is constantly to remind myself that I am ‘nothing’. This doesn’t make me humble; it damages my sense of identity (which is God’s gift to me) and my self-esteem.

What really does humble me – blows my mind at times actually – is the realisation that the Creator of all that is a) considered it worth his while to make me, and b) loves me *unconditionally* at all times, and I am special to him – as each one of us is. This information is of interest to the intellect, of course, but when it penetrates to the spirit, the ego doesn’t stand a chance.

Speaking of ego, secular wisdom is scared stiff of having the human ego dismantled, because ego is so often identified as the self. In reality the ego is just a smoke screen, a façade, and only when it is dismantled and we come to know God’s love, do we find our true self. That is what is meant by the words, often quoted (with variations), ‘I must lose myself in order to find myself.’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

965 **Atheists**

Trying to convince a secular intellectual – an atheist – that there is a God is like trying to convince a five-year-old that there is such a thing as passionate, romantic, sexual love. This is why, in the presence of such people, I almost always keep my mouth shut. While I have no time for their arguments, I must in no way judge them, and I absolutely respect their right to think and believe the way they do – and let me not forget that I was a (reluctant) atheist for a couple of very painful years in the early 1990s. However, I now have better use for my limited energy than to expend it in fruitless disputation. They must find their own paths. However, I cannot but feel a great sadness that they are unable to experience the incredibly beautiful spiritual reality which is their birthright.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

966 **Fred provides the solution**

‘My lifelong friend, when you are hurting, I am hurting, for we are inseparable. I can’t cope with the pain either, and there is one – only one – thing to do: each time the terrifying lightning strikes, be like a little child, and tell the God of all that is how you are feeling in all truth – just as it is, I mean, just as it really is, and then quietly rest awhile in the haven of his presence.’

I was overawed by the simplicity of the solution. ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’ I asked meekly.

‘You did,’ replied Fred softly, for once acknowledging his origins.

(From ‘Simplicity’, story in *Life With Fred*)

967 **Justifying an introduction**

A question has just struck me: since I shall be giving *The Substance Of Dreams* only to a few close friends, why am I bothering to explain it all? Do you know, I haven’t the slightest idea! Perhaps it’s the teacher in me; or perhaps it is because a book, no matter how small, needs an introduction, and an introduction has to have something in it. On the other hand ... oh, what matter; it’s written now!

(From the Introduction to *The Substance Of Dreams*)

968 **Control or no control?**

The notion that we are in control of our lives is pure illusion, tenaciously held in youth but relinquished with the passage of time. We can, at best, decide what our next thought or action will be – which may include planning for the future. But to assume that we have control over the outcome is to live in a world of fantasy. It has long been my perception that those with the most contentment in life have the ability to live in the now – much of the time anyway, although we do well not to forget that the past contains treasures which can enrich us in the present.

(From Part 1 of *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*,
3rd edn)

969 **Really, it's all about love**

Sigh!

I s'pose I need your forgiveness, God,
For misdeed and dereliction;
And I s'pose you immediately noticed, God,
That I said that without conviction.
It's not that I think I'm perfect, please note;
I know I have many flaws,
And often get stuck in a cul de sac,
And, from time to time, break your laws ...
Now, there's the bothersome bone to pick:
My mentors were wonted to shove
Your rules and commandments down my throat;
Yet, surely you're naught but pure love ...

(From 'Apologetics', poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

970 **Nothing stays the same**

I doubt if I'll live to see it, but it wouldn't surprise me if the researchers of some future generation were to discover that tobacco possesses wonderful curative properties, that caffeine is a natural relaxant, heroin a harmless healer of haemorrhoids, butter a promoter of cardiac health, and that every baby's bottle should, in the interests of the infant's physical and mental development, be liberally spiked with pure alcohol.

(From 'Eat, Drink & Be Merry', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

971 **The joys of dog ownership**

Our dog smells as a good dog should,
As only rancid cheeses could;
Not a dirty smell, just a canine pong,
Which lingers on when he is gone
For walkies whither he is brung
To roll around in wholesome dung,
And cake his fur, and do it well,
And bring home an updated smell ...

(From 'Our Dog', poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

972 **Why does a writer hold on to mediocre material?**

The reason I hold on to the stuff which I consider mediocre is that, once a piece has been produced, I am loath to discard it. Can you imagine a loving parent wanting to send a less-than-perfect child back to the maker? Although – hold on; let me think for a moment – yes, I will let you in on my little secret: over the years I have produced a small number of pieces which were so awful, some of them positively cringeworthy, that I dumped them. You may assert that there is a substantial proportion of the remaining material that falls into the same category!

(From ‘The Maverick’, essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

973 **The inner journey**

We cannot live vicariously – cannot find our peace and happiness if you prefer – through others, no matter how much we love them or they love us, no matter how ‘normal’ or ‘functional’ our environment. The journey to peace and happiness is always an inner one, in a very real sense an exploration of the inner landscape. That is why, when we are feeling very low, and might say, ‘Look at all I have in my life; what the hell is wrong with me?’ we are profoundly misguided. Inner turmoil, with notable exceptions, has little or nothing to do with the presence or absence of gratitude for one’s external situation. It makes no more sense to draw the ‘ingratitude conclusion’ when feeling down than assuming that a severe physical illness displays ingratitude for all one’s positive circumstances. Unless we are unwell, the turmoil is an integral part of the journey toward wholeness and peace.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

974 **Nature points the way**

Nature will love you, entertain you and tell you most of what you need to know – or she will guide you to where you can find it when you simply remain quietly in her presence.

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

975 **In good company**

‘Shush!’ said Fred. ‘She of whom you speak so glowingly – and masterfully – is coming through the front door at this very moment. You don’t want her to catch you talking to yourself again. She is already entertaining serious doubts about your mental stability.’

I was about to say that, when talking to myself, you couldn’t be talking to a nicer fellow, but there wasn’t time ...

(From ‘Masculists Arise!’, story in *Life With Fred*)

976 **Sowing the seed unconditionally**

I am so glad that you enjoyed the story and I would be happy and honoured for you to share it with whomever you choose. In an earlier letter, I was saying that I have learned always to give my writing away unconditionally, meaning that nobody need feel the obligation to say anything about what I write unless they really wish to do so. That same unconditionality also includes my desire for the work to reach as many people as would find it enjoyable or helpful without my necessarily knowing about it.

I did a reading of my stuff (poems, stories, essays, etc.) to an active retirement association yesterday ... I love to read my work out loud and it was a joy and privilege to share my lines with these people. They were genuinely enthusiastic and gracious in their reception – but it was important for me to decide in advance to give regardless of the outcome.

(From a letter, May 2005)

977 **Healing is a process**

It is very helpful for me to remember that healing is a process, not a sudden, blinding, flash of light. So it takes time, but at least I am getting slowly better, and I find that what comes slowly but surely is more solid and longer lasting than the instant stuff. Brewed, freshly-ground coffee is always nicer than the instant variety, but it takes longer to prepare.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

978 **Faith versus trust**

Faith and trust are not the same, even though at times, up to now I may seem to have used them interchangeably. That's because my perspective on this topic is only just clarifying. Faith is, or at least starts life as, blind adherence to a belief handed down by somebody else. Trust is something we do not bestow until we *know* somebody and find them trustworthy. Where God is concerned, quite apart from finding him utterly trustworthy, it is impossible to come to know him without falling madly in love with him. In which case trusting him becomes a whole lot easier. Trust of this sort makes faith, in the traditional sense, redundant.

To put it another way: faith is born of resolute belief. Trust is born of known love. Poles apart. If others believe that faith is a gift, that's fine with me, but in my case faith was a teeth-gritting adherence to a given doctrine, a faith dredged up from the depths of my humanity. No wonder the word – in its original sense – still turns my stomach.

Trust is the 'gift of love'. No white knuckles here. I learn to let it flow. The more I focus on the depth of the love God has for me and I for him, the easier trust becomes. So I focus on love not trust.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

979 **Portobello Market**

My wife and I still have a sign on our toilet door that we bought in the Portobello Market the year before we got married. It reads:

Con Ve Ni Ence

Get It? My wife also bought a magnificent, full-length tapestry coat there. A few weeks later we were visiting friends in Ireland, herself clad in said coat, and their lounge curtains were made of the same material!

(From a letter, September 1999)

980 **Fred the smart ass**

Fred was in one of his smart-ass moods (a not infrequent occurrence, I might add), and I would sooner have confided my latest woes to somebody more compassionate, but I needed an ear, and Fred's was the only one available.

'I must be out of my mind, Fred.'

'Merely confirming my long-held suspicions,' he retorted. 'But do tell me, for I am curious: what prompts the current observation on your dubious mental condition?'

With praiseworthy restraint, I ignored the sniper fire, and unloaded my troubles: 'Getting this pet for the family, Fred. You will doubtless have noticed, in the last forty-eight hours, that our cosy household community has added a diminutive, canine quadruped to its number.'

'A dim ... what?'

'A puppy to you.'

'About time, if you ask me,' said Fred. 'A dog is what this family has needed from day one.'

I was tempted to suggest that with Fred around, who needs a dog, but I let it go.

(From 'Give A Dog A Bad Name', story in *Life With Fred*)

981 **The gift of prayer**

Less and less, as time goes by, am I able to identify with any definition or explanation of prayer that delineates it as an activity to which one allocates specific time, effort, form, words and so forth; that is, an activity which is distinct from the other activities of one's daily life.

I do, of course, 'say prayers' morning and evening but that is only because the discipline is good for me. In reality, however, at these and all other times 'prayer is our love shared'. And, since I am constantly receiving and returning My Beautiful One's love in the most wondrous ways, no matter where I am or what I am doing, my entire life is a prayer. And that is not a boast; far from it. Rather it is an expression of heartfelt gratitude.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

982 **Noise**

‘I have had occasion to moan more than once about the background music in coffee shops, Lucille, and, on reflection, I believe this cacophony but bears witness to a greater malaise: most people nowadays can’t seem to function without noise. As a case in point, I stopped at a reputable hotel for a lunchtime coffee and a sandwich while en route to an eastern metropolis recently. In the establishment’s coffee shop, there were two large television screens blaring *Sky News* at high decibels in competition with a raucous, current hit on the background music system. Nobody was watching either television, and since all present, with the exception of me, were in conversation in groups varying from two to six, I doubt if anybody was tuned into the chartbuster either. The astonishing thing was that nobody seemed to take the slightest bit of notice of the hubbub despite the fact that they all had to raise their voices to converse. I had to repeat ‘a coffee and a ham sandwich, please’ three times to the young lady behind the counter, which exasperated me, but which she seemed to consider quite normal because I noticed two other customers doing the same thing and, on each occasion, she just smiled, nodded her head and scribbled in her docket book.’

(From ‘The Sound Of Silence’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

983 **Thankfully, we are all different**

I have made a decision to celebrate my uniqueness from now on, not shove it in other people’s faces, indeed anything but that, rather to celebrate it quietly deep inside myself ...

To keep the record straight, I of course know that everybody is unique and equally precious to the creator, and thank God for that ...

I shall finish this section on a light-hearted note. I was at the chiropodist yesterday, to discover that my right foot is quite a bit wider than my left foot. Later, I jokingly said to my wife, ‘I’m a freak!’ ‘No,’ she answered, ‘you’re unique!’ Now isn’t that nice? Also the truth.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

984 **Love affair with a mountain**

No urgency there is to descend;
The spirit of the mountain bids me stay,
No other promise save that of love,
And I, for these rapt moments,
Am safe and at peace,
One with the mountain,
Enraptured with Connemara,
My enduring passion,
And in love with its Creator.

(From 'How Lovely On The Mountain', poem in
The Substance Of Dreams)

985 **No problem**

'One cannot afford to be too fastidious about language, can one Lucille? It is changing all the time and what is common slang to one generation becomes a generally acceptable mode of expression to the next. In recent times, for instance, even I have been known to describe things as "cool" or "iffy" when circumstances demand. But there is one linguistic quirk widespread particularly among the younger generation that I just cannot abide, namely the habit of responding to one's "Thank you" with a "No problem".'

(From 'No Problem ...', story in *Life With Lucille*)

986 **I am responsible for me**

While I don't wish to offend people, I don't have to be a 'people pleaser', i.e. I don't have to gear everything I do to making people like me, or constantly measure up to their expectations of me. Doing this is a kind of psychological prostitution – selling the essence of who I am for some imagined benefit which rarely satisfies. What I am doing is 'giving my power' to them. I need to take it back. What they think of me is their excess baggage to carry, not mine. I am responsible for me, not them.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

987 **What religion?**

In case the question should cross your mind, for I am occasionally asked: what religion or denomination am I? God loves me with a stupendous, infinite, steadfast, unconditional love, and I love God with an intensity that frequently boggles my understanding – a God who in recent years has far transcended all my previous perceptions of him. That’s all I am able to tell you. At the time of writing, I am not concerned with labels.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

988 **Using appropriate tools to get balance**

This is a timely reminder for me that I have several powerful tools that I can use to deal with the negative ... The problem is that I will often stay stuck in the murky quagmire of the problem instead of immersing myself in the healing waters of the solution. There is a kind of perversity in me that bewilders me: knowing what to do but not doing it, or at least not doing it persistently enough. Thank you for highlighting this for me. I really needed to hear that right now.

(From a letter, December 2012)

989 **Seek and you will find**

The diligent bee finds fulfilment
 In tirelessness,
The early bird breakfast
 In punctuality,
The resolute spider its aspirations
 In perseverance,
The soaring eagle undreamed-of heights
 In acquiescence,
The domestic cat tranquillity
 In passiveness,
And my vulnerable spirit serenity
 In your gentleness.

(‘Sources’, poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

990 **Sacred sexuality**

Is there any normal adult human being who doesn't know what sex is? It seems extremely unlikely. And is sex the same as sexuality? Here is an extract from a personal development module which I designed and presented during my college career and which is an appropriate introduction to what follows:

The view that sexuality finds its only true expression in romance and sexual intercourse is as limited as perceiving a pen sketch of his mother that Leonardo da Vinci did at nine years of age, as the pinnacle of his genius. Our sexuality is at the very core of who we are as human beings, male and female, and, despite considerable study by psychologists and social scientists, is still – though they might well contest this – little understood. Personally, I can't help feeling that we'd be better off not to try to understand it; just live it.*

I have expressed the thought before that God doesn't limit us, we limit God, and I am increasingly coming to understand what a mouthful I uttered when I said that, or, more appropriately, when I was felicitously brought to this threshold of understanding.

I had always thought that sex and sexuality were given by God to procreate the race, give us pleasure in our human state, foster (in an ideal world) the complimentary feminine and masculine qualities, and that he himself is above all that sort of thing ... This is utter nonsense ...

Even the most stupendous experience of sexuality in the purely human dimension is but a faint shadow of the actuality ...

Many religions would regard the notion of God being a sexual, sensual being, as preposterous, profane or even heretical, despite the fact that some of them will assure us that we are made in his image and likeness. Seen from a blinkered, human standpoint, that might just be understandable, but in the light of what I am attempting to describe here, this view holds no water. In my perception, most religions have a

marked tendency to reduce the Divine to one dimension or, at least, a small number of dimensions. The truth of the matter is that God is multi-dimensional beyond our wildest imaginings. Moreover, the mainstream religions have long demonised the human body, sexuality and sensuality, which is bizarre, given that these are the beautiful gifts of the Creator whom they claim to represent. Sadly, this is their great loss. I say that with a pervasive sense of sorrow rather than any trace of superiority.

I have come to call this sublime state of things by the term ‘Sacred sexuality’. It is precious beyond measure.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Communications Course – Getting The Balance Right, Seminar, Part 4.

991 **Allowing Nature to nurture**

Savouring the wonder of a woodland walk,
Feet and mind meandering,
Now weary from the many winding paths,
I rest in a glade,
The sanctuary of the shade,
The balm of a breeze,
The tranquillity of the trees,
And watch the lilting leaves aloft,
Silhouetted against the noonday sun,
Dancing kaleidoscopes on a carpet of clover,
The ever-moving pattern of minuscule lights and shadows
Flickering before my eyes like playful will-o'-the-wisps.

A copious cloud covers the celestial spotlight,
The curtain falls on the dappled dance of Nature,
And the matinée performance of creation’s cabaret concludes.
I linger wistfully awhile
To contemplate the ineffable beauty of simple things,
Until, refreshed in body and spirit,
I am fit to embrace the forest path anew.

(‘A Woodland Walk’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

992 **Fred tries to help in a moment of doubt**

‘Have you heard, Fred, about the dyslexic, agnostic insomniac?’

‘No, but I have a sneaking suspicion that you are about to tell me.’

‘I am. He lies awake all night, wondering if there is a Dog.’

‘Ha, ha! That’s a good one all right,’ chuckled Fred affably, ‘though you’d want to be awake to get it. Tell us another.’

‘No, no, my dear old anecdote appreciator, I’m not starting a frivolous joke session. I have an ulterior motive in starting the conversation with this little witticism, for I, though neither dyslexic nor insomniac as yet, am in the depths of despair after fifty or so years of searching, wondering if there is a God.’

‘Gosh, that’s a bothersome question all right, when it bothers you, that is. But there is actually no need for it to bother you at all. Take courage, esteemed companion, for I know, in my heart of hearts – or our heart of hearts if you prefer – that all will be well, here and hereafter. This is not the first time that I have reassured you on such matters.’

(From ‘Fred Fails To Convince’, story in *Life With Fred*)

993 **Two types of silence**

There are two types of silence:

- ☒ Anguished silence, where nothing is spoken and nothing is heard, or where the speaking takes the form of a question or a plea from me but the response is – or appears to be – zero.
- ☒ Eloquent silence, where nothing is spoken and nothing is heard but everything that needs to be said is expressed in perfect eloquence and with perfect articulation, but this is accomplished in a language beyond language – the wondrous, wordless language of the heart and spirit.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

994 **The nature of gratitude**

I have long been aware how wholesome it is for me to have an 'attitude of gratitude'. For a long time, however, I erroneously thought that I had to *feel* grateful in order to *be* grateful. Eventually, I tumbled to the truth: consider the people in my life whom I love. I always love them but I don't always *feel* loving. Indeed, there are times when they get under my skin when I might feel like throttling them! However, even if I feel passively homicidal (!), I haven't stopped loving them; I still love them but I don't *feel* loving. Likewise I now always *am* grateful but I don't always *feel* grateful in that moment. In other words, committed gratitude, like committed love, begins with a decision to *be* grateful. As I continue to renew and implement this decision, the feeling of gratitude becomes more frequent to the point where it is now with me most of the time. Feeling grateful is a lovely warm, comforting, spiritual experience. However, it is also comforting, even if not to the same degree, to know that I don't have to *feel* grateful in order to *be* grateful.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

995 **Discontent**

I know how little hamsters feel
Inside their little wooden wheel,
Going round and round and round.
Nothing complex or profound,
They don't pretend, nor scarce disguise
They're addicted to this exercise,
For endless turning is their scene,
And that's the way it's always been;
Though obviously it's plain to see
They differ quite a bit from me:
They're happy with their humdrum lot,
While I, as sure as hell, am not;
They in joyful spirals wrapped,
I in vicious circles trapped.

(From 'Treadmill', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

996 **At my mother's grave**

Fifty years on,
And I visit the place where we brought you
On that final journey in June.
Sometimes it seems so long, long ago,
At others, as if it were yesterday;
My goodness, how time is illusory!
... My composure disintegrates,
The tears come tumbling down my cheeks
And I make no attempt to stop them,
For I need them to heal me at sixty-four
As much as I did at fourteen.
Fifty years on, Mummy ...
And it still hurts.

(From 'Fifty Years On', poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

997 **A bit of gobbledegook**

'The work which is the object of our scrutiny this evening is a product of sublime brilliance, displaying an almost cosmic introspection into the esoteric polemics of our time, coupled with a delicate, if sometimes scathing, indictment, empirically derived, of our cognitive, hedonistic society. The main protagonists, in this masterpiece, are drawn with vigour, devastating directness, painstaking, even pedantic attention to detail, and clearly display the many-faceted spectrum of the author's deeply reflective character, which plainly possesses an extrasensory link with a charismatic nexus.'

(From 'Dissection', story in *When The Bug Bites*)

998 **Definition of a good man**

I would rather be a good man with many flaws, than a bad man with one or two apparently outstanding virtues; for the good man's virtues, though imperfect, are solid and sincere, whereas the bad man's are illusory. That's if, at bottom, there are any bad men.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

999 **Writing? Do your own thing**

I was going to take a look at what the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has to say about the matter [poetry], but the set I have was bought for me by my good father in the late nineteen-forties when I still had not been weaned off Noddy, Winnie the Pooh and Rupert the Bear, and most of the articles date from the late twenties or early thirties. I have little doubt, therefore, but that their view of what constitutes poetry is even more mired in anachronistic tradition than the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* and it would only upset me, so I'll give it a miss. Anyway, the *World Book Encyclopedia's* view on the subject is top notch and just what the doctor ordered. Actually, my own is much better – for me that is. I have no desire to impose my design on anybody else, so if you don't like it, devise your own, write for your own delight and delectation, and don't let those unspeakable, self-appointed 'experts' who dictate what poetry should be stop you. Even this essay was written entirely for my own edification, although, if history is anything to go by, I shall probably slip a few copies of it to selected members of my fan club.

(From 'What Is Poetry?', essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

1000 **Now, that's love**

You, my love of loves,
Are beautiful in giving
And beautiful in receiving,
Beautiful in my agony
And beautiful in my ecstasy,
Beautiful in imparting
And beautiful in withholding,
Beautiful in the temporal
And beautiful in the timeless,
Beautiful in activity
And beautiful in the stillness,
Beautiful in your speaking
And beautiful in your silence ...

(From 'Beautiful In Everything', poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

1001 **Eternity**

Many years gone, when but a child,
In a land of blissful never-never,
I cherished the thought, in my childish way,
That my life will go on forever.
And I've finally grasped –
Which brings good cheer –
That the child was right.
Just ... not here.

(From 'Time Flies', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

1002 **Ask and you shall receive**

The man was overawed. He had heard that the Spirit existed and lived atop the highest mountain in the land, the summit of which was always swathed in dense clouds, but had scarcely dared to believe in what most people declared to be but a myth. Many had tried to climb the mountain to seek proof, but it was too high, the way too tortuous, and the dense clouds had some kind of mysterious quality that resisted all magical attempts to penetrate them. Yet here was that very Spirit communicating directly with him in his own domain. Paradoxically, in tandem with the overwhelming feeling of awe, was the powerful sensation that this was the most natural circumstance in the world, and he felt completely at ease in the Spirit's presence.

(From 'Back To The Source', story in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

1003 **When it's an inside job**

Hostilities have again broken out on the internal battleground,
And – nothing new I might add –
I scarcely know who the combatants are,
Much less what their bizarre conflict is about.
You'd think they'd have the common decency to tell me,
Given that they've had free lodgings inside my head for years,
But that simple courtesy never seems to occur to them.

(From 'Mindfield', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1004 **If only we could know our true selves**

A much more sinister and damaging aspect of all this is the way so many of us internalise illusion as *the truth about ourselves*. How many people have a poor sense of their own worth because, in childhood, they were constantly told they were no good or were loved only for what they achieved, never for just who they were; or, worse, were cruelly abused and were left with a legacy of self-disgust or acute disillusion which prevented them from seeing and valuing their true selves? How many artistic gifts have people never discovered or developed because their teachers told them they were useless at drawing, music, acting or whatever? How many people smoulder with guilt because of the teachings of a demanding and arbitrary deity who does little else but issue commands as to how they are to behave and stipulate the punishments they will incur when they fail, as fail they will? And how many people have sublime spiritual gifts deep within them, which could nurture them and others as they were designed to do, but never discover these gifts because the world, and even their religious teachers, have persistently told them that such things do not exist? And for how many people is the illusion compounded by the confusion caused by mixed messages, the most corrosive of which has to be, ‘God is a God of *unconditional* love; now, here are all the *conditions*’? The list could go on and on. How many illusory ‘facts’ have we internalised as incontrovertible truth about ourselves, and what damage and resulting anguish have they caused? How many people only live half lives because they are living mostly in an illusion about themselves?

(From ‘Reality And Illusion’, essay in
Reality And Illusion & Other Essays)

1005 **The value of wholeness**

It is difficult to be spiritual when you’ve got severe toothache. Not impossible; but difficult. The same is often true of acute heartache.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1006 **Why certain places are special**

‘What is it about this place, David? I always find a peace here that I can get nowhere else, and I know you do too.’

‘I wish I knew, my love. I have often pondered the same question and have finally come to the conclusion that it’s probably beyond human understanding. There is what I can only call “a sense of presence” here. Maybe it has to do with the wonder of Nature, who makes her nurturing especially potent in certain places, through, as here, a fusion of mountain, water, the wind, the birds, the vegetation, and the trees at the lower level. Or perhaps it has to do with people from earlier generations who have left their spirit here in ways that we cannot comprehend. Or perhaps it’s a combination of all these. Who can tell?’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

1007 **‘Small print’ prayer**

I have never been able to stomach what I call ‘small print’ prayer, that is, when praying to God for ourselves or others, going into minute detail about the issue being prayed for, rather like the pages of small print on a contract – as if the Creator of all that is needed to be given instructions! When I pray for somebody, God knows what he/she needs. Any words I might use, if praying in their presence, are solely to encourage the person being prayed for. The same is true when I pray for myself; the simple words I use are to tell or remind me where I am at and clarify, in my own mind, what exactly I am bringing to God for his love to deal with, and to keep the channel open between him and me. He doesn’t need the small print. He does not, I am certain, require verbose appeals, nor is he bothered with semantics. All he wants is to hear what is going on in my deepest heart regardless of how I express it. Like I said, he knows my needs anyway. The primary purpose of my prayer is to keep the channel between him and me open.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1008 **When you don't know what to say**

I could see clearly, and it distressed me, that, despite my undoubted sincerity in raising the matter, I had made a serious *faux pas*, but, try as I might, I just couldn't think how to redeem the situation, and make amends to the poor old thing [Fred]. The only things that came to mind were hollow platitudes, and hollow platitudes would definitely not carry the day. I remained, therefore, uncharacteristically speechless.

(From 'Turning Tables', story in *Life With Fred*)

1009 **What does God think of the world?**

It could equally be that God views the whole glum charade with great sadness. Although the more I think about it, the more I am drawn to the conclusion that what is actually happening is that God, who is so vastly greater than any and all of our finite perceptions of him, has a mystical ability to use most of our human efforts and intellectual manoeuvrings to bring us ultimately to him. Put more simply, his infinite love – coupled with his infinite humility – honours us *where we are*.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1010 **Anxious parent**

How still he lies, my little son,
In the recovery room.
He does not know that I am here.
He opens his eyes
And momentarily looks at me
With an unseeing gaze,
Still under the ether of the anaesthetic.
I try to stem the tears that well up inside
And tell myself that all will be well.
He is there, yet not there.
He looks but does not see me –
Me with whom he conversed so animatedly
Only a few hours earlier.

(From 'Recovered Treasure', poem in *Overdoing It!*)

1011 **Is spirituality a serious business?**

This is a good place, I believe, to introduce what may appear to be a slightly different tone. A question: is spirituality serious and solemn, a state in which we have to be holy, devout, pure, self-effacing, perhaps poor, and aiming for perfection, observe prescribed rituals and say formalised prayers, where worship, praise, obedience and, in many scriptures, even fear of God are the order of the day, where one must suffer in silence, not count the cost and never get angry with God nor allow any profanity to escape one's lips? Good gracious, no! Before I go any further, be assured that I am not decrying any of these things; each may well be intrinsically valid in an appropriate setting. But, for me (and I stress that I speak only for myself), when they are all combined together as a way of relating to God, that's not spirituality at all; it's onerous submission or, if taken to an extreme, virtually a life sentence. Spirituality is real beyond imagining. Coupled with that, it's as light as a feather, not some heavy burden to be carried. When it seems otherwise, that's just the trials and tribulations of the human condition getting in the way, as inevitably they will.

(From 'Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II',
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

1012 **Keeping one's own counsel**

I don't like talk for talking's sake,
An erudite façade to fake,
An intellectual look to hatch,
The greatest orators to match.
And gossip, far from inspiration,
Provokes my instant condemnation,
Plus – this will come as no surprise –
I scorn the truth dressed up in lies.
I never strive to sound absurd
With mindless phrase and shallow word;
So, when of worth I've naught to say,
I stuff it till another day.

(From 'The Silent Planet', poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

1013 **Never give up**

... until April 28th 2006 that is, when, without any warning and for no apparent reason, the lights went out.

All the miracles, the wonder and the beauty that have been so much a part of my life, especially in the last eleven years or so, were utterly submerged by one thought which completely overpowered me: ‘All that you have experienced was sheer illusion, all the more cruel because it appeared so real, so beautiful, and you have finally woken up to the truth: there is nothing, there is nobody in control, no God, no anything, nothing ...’

One month later ... out of the blue, the lights came back on, brighter than ever, illuminating everything in augmented three dimensions and in brilliant colour. It was beautiful. I was stunned. No suffering lasts forever. Thank God.

(From ‘The Day The Lights Went Out’, essay in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

1014 **Nosy parkers**

If only most people
Would mind their own business
But the problem is this:
They don’t seem to know
What their own business is,
And nurture a flair
For unwanted intrusion ...

(From ‘If Only’, poem in *Overdoing It!*)

1015 **Compliments and insults**

You know me well enough to know that I would not pass an insincere compliment. I have often said that an insincere compliment is worse than an insult. With an insult, one knows what one is dealing with, but with the insincere compliment, one is getting mixed messages and doesn’t know what the hidden agenda is.

(From a letter, February 2004)

1016 **God and art**

What causes the problems in my relationship with God are the tatters of my old beliefs and conditioning that still cling to me, but that are dissolving slowly but surely under the influence of his infinite, steadfast, unconditional love. And what are these lingering tatters? [I give just one of them here.]

Tatter No 1.

God is a serious God and has time only for serious issues, therefore art is frivolous and self-indulgent.

Dante said, 'Nature is the art of God.' Look at the incredible abundance and variety in Nature. There are hundreds of thousands of species of plants. God is a wildly extravagant and prolific artist. God *is an artist*. Look at the incredible beauty of my beloved Connemara. Look at the wonder of the myriad species of animals. Look at the wonder of men and women. Actually, when one comes to think of it, God isn't an artist; God is *the* artist.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1017 **Balance is the key**

The unhealthy notion that humility means self-effacing obsequiousness is widespread in our society. Small wonder that humility as an ideal is so unpopular. I have long since dumped this false notion; but, equally, I constantly strive to avoid the pernicious, opposing extreme: self-righteous grandiosity. Balance is the key here. It is wholesome and healthy for me to recognise the undeniable gifts that have been *given* to me by accepting them deep within myself, by acknowledging them to others when it is appropriate to do so, and also by graciously accepting the compliment when my gifts are sincerely affirmed by others. In short, I intensely dislike boastfulness, especially in myself, but, with equal intensity, I detest false humility.

Indeed, the best concise definition of humility that I have come across is: 'Humility is the *correct* estimation of who I am.'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1018 **Consulting Lucille when I am in dire need**

‘It’s no good, Lucille. Nothing doing. I had rather hoped you might provide the necessary ingredients, but my mind is a complete blank and you are conspicuous by your silence.’

‘My dear Ken, you are talking in riddles. Please be a bit more lucid – and please don’t take that amiss.’ She knows I can be a bit sensitive, hence the considerate addendum.

‘I thought it was perfectly obvious, old thing. With hindsight, I can see that it wasn’t, but mental inertia dulls the awareness. I had intended to write my way out of the current impasse, but I’m sitting here, brain at the ready, notebook open, pen poised, but I can’t think of anything to say. Not the first time, of course. Frustratingly, I’ve been here on many occasions. I thought you might bung in an idea or two to set the ball rolling.’

‘Me? Bung in an idea or two?’

‘You are a Muse, you know.’

‘Yes I am. But I’m not a psychologist.’

‘No, you’re not. Thank God! But you have often dug me out of sticky situations in the past. So how about it on this occasion? I’m in dire need.’

(From ‘Impasse’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1019 **English is a rich language**

‘I’ve often pondered the vast range of words available to the human species,’ remarked Fred. ‘Take our vernacular, for instance. The assortment of words available to us is quite mind-boggling. What’s frustrating is that one understands so few of them. Take ‘esoteric’ as a case in point. Any idea what it signifies?’

‘Well, I can’t guarantee a dictionary definition, but I think it sort of means rarefied or appealing to the select few – a word that often applies, in my experience, to certain obscure book titles. For example, one would hardly expect *Little-known Serbo-Croat Dialects* or *The Life Cycle of the Lesser Spotted Newt* to become best sellers.’

(From ‘Sounds Funny’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1020 **Despair**

Valiantly I have struggled
To keep the boat afloat
For what seems like an eternity
But my strength is now exhausted,
My purpose all extinguished,
No dream to fire my spirit
And my hope's abandoned ship.

(From 'On The Rocks', poem in *Oh, My Head!*)

1021 **Self-esteem versus self-confidence**

Self-esteem is fundamentally how I feel about myself as a person and my state of being, how I relate to and think about myself – in other words, my inner environment. Self-confidence, on the other hand, is how I feel about the way in which I relate to other people and external situations and about how I utilise my particular attributes in the world at large – in other words, my outer environment.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1022 **Seeing the best in others**

'Fred, it is not good for your own psychic well-being to think so ill of a fellow Homo sapiens. Positive thoughts attract positive feelings. If you will but exert yourself, even a trifle, my dear old cerebral companion, you will be able to perceive, beyond the mist of this man's repulsive persona, that he has many sterling qualities.'

(From 'Capitulation', story in *Life With Fred*)

1023 **Belief and beyond**

But, in the world of humankind,
Nothing is absolute:
There is no faith without disbelief,
No disbelief without despair
Yet no despair without renewal ...

(From 'Looking Up', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1024 **Compassion, support, solidarity**

‘I say, Lucille, look here at this poster for a second: a free lecture on Astral Projection and Esoteric Psychology. That’s some mouthful, isn’t it? Never heard of it before. Have you? Come to think of it, you’re the encyclopaedia of the outfit; what do you know about such things?’

‘Not much,’ said Lucille.

‘How much?’

‘Really, not much at all.’

‘Lucille! How much?’

‘Er ... well ... nothing, actually.’

‘You surprise me, my dear old reservoir of knowledge; usually, you’re informed, abreast, conversant, *au fait* and so forth.’

Lucille hesitated. ‘Um ... the truth of the matter is that when I came to understand the advisability of your steering clear of the complex and rarefied, I decided to avoid the stuff like the plague too. What’s good for the gander is good for the goose, to rearrange a well-known expression. Compassion, support, solidarity – and all that sort of thing.’

I was deeply moved.

(From ‘Right Hand Woman’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1025 **Criticism and judgement**

If I criticise somebody, am I making a judgement on them? Yes, I am. Does that mean that judgement and criticism are synonymous? They can be, but mostly I think not. Criticism may be warranted in certain cases, but more often it is fuelled by prejudice, envy, anger, pride, ignorance, vengefulness, the desire to feel superior, and the like. Judgement, on the other hand, suggests an opinion or a conclusion formed after careful – and hopefully objective – consideration or deliberation.

Seen in this light, it is better for me to avoid criticism entirely, and only make judgements when they are absolutely unavoidable. The bottom line is that I am, for the most part, not in a position to judge anybody.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1026 **More!**

*Once the will is touched by God, it cannot find
contentment except in the Divinity.*

(John of the Cross)

When Oliver Twist asked for more, he was hungry, very hungry. A similar hunger can operate in relation to matters spiritual. I experience such beauty, wonder and miracles in my life, and I am often – in latter years daily – in awe at the sheer fact that this is occurring. What happens, however, is that these beautiful and profound experiences create an insatiable appetite for more of the same, an appetite that can never be satisfied in this life. We must wait, or, as I put it in one of my poems: ‘Now I’ve tasted God, I can never get enough till the fullness of forever.’

I have heard the expression, ‘God is a drug’. I have never researched who said it or what they meant by it, but if what I have stated above is what it signifies, then it is true. One must add, however, that God is indisputably a *benign* drug, engendering a deep desire for the happiness of the eternal realm. Perhaps the only down side is the fact that it also generates a marked dissatisfaction with temporal things. But there’s no harm in that, providing we keep a sense of balance on the rightful place of earthly things and situations in our spiritual journey. We are but travellers here, and temporal things are God’s gifts to help us on our way.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1027 **The only way to be loved**

Yet I know that the sensation
Of being loved completely
Ever permeates my being
In the world that I am seeing;
But it brooks no vain assessment,
For its substance has no limits
And its nature is eternal.

(From ‘Love With No Limits’, poem in *The Power Of Light*)

1028 **On being spoiled**

When parents spoil a child, in the sense of giving him/her things that are not good for his/her well-being, we refer to the child as being ‘spoiled rotten’. God, however, in his extravagant generosity, spoils me all the time. But there isn’t a bit of it that is not good for me. Everything he gives me nurtures and enlivens me. It must be that I am being ‘spoiled beautiful’.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1029 **The spiritual and the secular**

‘The English poet, John Keats once said, “Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced.” How right he was. Nowhere is this truer than in the realm of the spirit, where intellectual prowess and scientific study are virtually worthless, and there is no substitute for profound personal experience. However, at an alarmingly rapid rate, people are being drawn to the secular belief that the realm of the spirit does not exist. And if they hold that it does not exist, it will be impossible for them to allow themselves to search in that realm and discover the awesome wonder of the ultimate reality. This reliance on self and denial of higher values will turn out to be one of the greatest tragedies mankind will ever have witnessed.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

1030 **Jasmine waxes philosophical**

‘Hmm! Do you know what I think the problem is?’

‘Tell me.’

‘I was forgetting that I’m a fairy. There’s an important lesson for us all here: accept who we are and stay within our limitations ... It is vital to discover the essence of our being, acknowledge our strengths and weaknesses, and nurture our particular gifts.’

‘You’re getting interestingly philosophical, my favourite fairy. Say on.’

(From ‘In The Swim’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

1031 **A father's prayer**

I do not ask

That you will protect them from tribulation;
I know it is not your practice
To grant such dispensations.
They have experienced affliction already –
The everyday consequence of being alive –
And I suffer with them in compassion,
Though I cannot carry their burden;
And they will suffer further;
They must.
Pain is endemic to the human condition;
It is part of life's incomprehensible strategy.

But I do ask

That you will save them
From all practices perverse,
All evil pervasive,
Temptations persuasive
And abuse of their gifts,
So that their travail may not be prevented
From accomplishing its primary, paradoxical purpose:
To help them grow and mature,
Day by day,
Into peace of mind here,
And peace of spirit hereafter.

(‘A Father’s Prayer’, poem in *Who Do They Think I Am*)

1032 **God as father/mother/lover**

I accept the validity of getting to know God better by reading about him, but in times of acute loneliness, this is of little use; it's like reading somebody's biography, but they are thousands of miles away. What I need is relationship, and the kind of thinking that crosses my mind at these times runs as follows: If I want to get to know my father/mother/lover better, I don't go and read his biography, I spend time with him, and this is a two-way process, or ought to be.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1033 **Thoughts on humility**

I will aspire to humility – a strong quality which gives me the freedom to accept myself as I am, to allow others to be who they are and not to feel threatened by my own character defects or the strengths and weaknesses of others. I will be glad to help others where appropriate, but I will not sell myself in service just to make people like me or validate me by their approval. That is spiritual prostitution. Disliking false humility, I will acknowledge the gifts I have been given, and accept compliments graciously, knowing that some of them are flattery.

Taking my cue from the first sentence of the last paragraph, I will ask for the gift of freedom rather than humility. The reason is that humility is one of those paradoxical qualities: the more I think I have, the less I possess. As I become more free, I can rejoice in the freedom, rather than fall into the trap of thinking that I have become more humble, therefore more virtuous.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1034 **A matter of priorities**

You mention how your writing plays hell with the housework! I have often said, and really mean, ‘The house will be here after I am gone, but if I don’t get the writing done, it won’t be here after I am gone!’ So, with some exceptions, if my writing and other chores compete for the same time slots, the writing gets first preference. Proper order, say I!

(From a letter, January 2013)

1035 **We need laughter**

We need laughter, my love,
As gentle as the new-born rain
That falls to earth in spring,
To wash away glum winter’s gloom
And soften our demeanour.

(From ‘We Need Laughter, My Love’, poem in *Oh, My Head!*)

1036 **The dubious delights of fame**

I'm like Milton – I can write;
I've penned my *Paradise Lost*.
I write about the pain of life
Regardless of the cost.
Oh dear, 'tis best to face the truth:
All this is but delusion.
I am, in fact, my only fan –
That seems an apt conclusion.
I'm not like Milton after all,
My gist you'll doubtless twig;
I'm just a minor poet who
Daren't hope to make it big.
But I can't give up just like that;
I must unleash my sword,
And write the promptings of my heart
Should there be ne'er reward.
But all things come to he who waits;
I know inside my head,
In fifty years, I'll be renowned,
And also be quite dead.

(‘Aspirations’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1037 **In praise of a favourite author – and more**

I remember reading a while ago that Rudyard Kipling described P.G. Wodehouse's ‘Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend’ as one of the most perfect short stories ever written. I agree with him. It's terrific. I wonder if I will ever get to write the perfect short story. Probably not. Hmmm! I ruminated for a few moments. Hold on! Here's a novel notion: perhaps I could write the *imperfect* short story instead. Now, where did that idea come from? Okay, okay, so all my stories are imperfect! I know that. What's germane to the issue is the degree of imperfection. I mean, to warrant the title ‘*The Imperfect Story*’ the thing would have to be close to total crap.

(From ‘The Imperfect Story’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1038 **Who can live in the now?**

Thus, I am finally concluding that while living at peace in the moment is a wonderful state of being when one can achieve it, most of us spend a good deal of time in the past and the future. That's the way it is. By past and future, I do not necessarily mean that we dwell in the *distant* past or the *distant* future. I can simply be sitting at my kitchen table having my morning mug of coffee but my mind is either preoccupied with the strange dream I had just before awakening twenty minutes ago, or considering the meeting I have to attend in an hour's time. I am not living in the present; I am not totally given to the enjoyment of my breakfast time to the exclusion of everything else. Living in the now means living in the *now*, and let's face it, most of us just cannot achieve that ideal most of the time ...

Living in the future is a somewhat different process because it entails either pleasurable anticipation of something that has not yet occurred or fear of impending doom. The thing that gave me pleasurable anticipation might not materialise, thus causing disappointment, frustration or depression. That which I fear might also not occur, which means I have suffered needlessly.

(From 'How Now?', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

1039 **The joy of writing**

I believe, to get real joy out of writing, that's all we have to do: say what *we* want to say, not what we think others might like us to say, or that of which the critics might approve. For me, it's a question of writing my truth based on what I observe both inside and outside myself, and this can range from the hilarious to the romantic, from the offbeat to the despairing and from the carnal to the spiritual. Once I have the kernel of an idea, I rarely wait to find out what the truth of the moment is, but put pen to paper and simply let the writing ... tell me what it is. I didn't plan this way of doing things; it just evolved.

(From 'God Loves A Trier', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1040 **Does God need us?**

I am constantly needy; I need God's constant loving guidance and grace; I cannot function without it; I depend on him for each breath. God, on the other hand, needs nothing from us. Yet, in seeming paradox, does he love us so much that he *chooses* to need us? As one of his greatest gifts to us, does he choose to need us as the channel of his grace to others? Does he choose to need, for himself, our love freely given? I believe so. Indeed, I will go further: I constantly experience his love in this way.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1041 **Goddesses get stressed too**

'All my other authors have been preoccupied – many even obsessed – with publication and fame, and you cannot conceive what stress that has always put me under. The silly asses lost sight of the intrinsic value of the writing in order to attain hollow glory and shallow adulation, and that used to do my head in. Once they attained celebrity status, most of them became insufferable. A Muse's lot is not an easy one, you can take it from me.'

(From 'Follow That', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1042 **Affirming faith**

I am also coming to understand that I need faith from God on a different plane *at all times*, what one might call 'affirming faith'. Specifically, since I experience God in a realm that is mostly, but by no means exclusively, beyond the tangible, the intellectual and the senses, I need a faith that assures me, *in my temporal, material and rational humanness*, that what I am living in the spiritual realm is authentic. I have discovered that this kind of faith is a gift also, and in times of tribulation when that faith wavers, a darkness that is impossible to describe temporarily dominates my soul. But I cannot appreciate the light unless I have lived in the darkness.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1043 **Trusting a higher power in times of crisis**

The best way to hang on,
It seems,
Is to let go.

(From 'Paradox', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1044 **Dance to the difference**

Each person is undoubtedly unique. The one thing we can say that is true of *all* of us is that each person is different from every other. I am reminded here of what Henry David Thoreau* said:

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.

I really like that.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* 1817–1862. American poet, essayist and philosopher.

1045 **Incensed**

'A month ago, Lucille, I was absolutely incensed by the lunatic ramblings of a so-called journalist, in a so-called newspaper. He took cheap pot-shots at my favourite poet – apart from myself that is – Brendan Kennelly. These pen-toting parasites who inhabit the columns of our various journals get paid, I believe, by the inch (of text that is, lest there be any absence of clarity on this point), and, being short of income that week, the blighter chose an easy target. Yes "incensed" is the word and, to quell any doubts on the matter, I am still as absolutely incensed as I was in the opening line. What's more, I am quite likely to continue to be incensed for the foreseeable future. Nice word that, "incensed", don't you think? One can spit it out with venom as the occasion demands. Try it.'

'Incensed,' said Lucille delicately.

'I should have known better, precious one. It's not in your nature to say anything with venom ...'

(From 'Better Late Than Never', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1046 **A friend in need**

‘Well, you called my name, and I came. Was there something?’

‘Oh yes. So I did. Forgetful of me. Er ...’ I hesitated.

‘Just say it like it is,’ the little fairy encouraged.

‘All right then. When you told me that you needed a human to work with and asked me to be the one, I understood that our mission would be to help other people in one way or another.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘And I had rather hoped that our first assignment would be to come to the assistance of a damsel in distress or of a whatever-the-male-version-of-a-damsel-in-distress is, if you’ll pardon the questionable syntax.’

‘That’s the general idea.’

‘But, but ...’ I was embarrassed.

‘But,’ she said, taking the reins, ‘it turns out that you’re the whatever-the-male-version-of-a-damsel-in-distress is, and it’s you who needs the help.’

‘Y-yes.’

‘Hmmm! You’d better tell your Jasmine all about it.’

(From ‘Mission Impossible’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

1047 **From fog to sunlight and beyond**

When I become aware that I have long been shrouded in the fog of false beliefs and the mist of misguided concepts, in other words in the delusive obscurity of my old self, and I then emerge into the sunlight of the infinite, of the Divine, deep within me – that is to say, when I am enabled to find my *true* self – I come to know that *all* is well. Illumination indeed! But even this wondrous light will eventually give way to a stupendously greater brilliance of which I daily experience astonishing foretastes even though I cannot fully comprehend them as yet. But this I do know: I am, moment to moment, regardless of appearance or circumstance, held in the timeless embrace of a Love beyond measure. And more than that I have no need to know.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1048 **Keeping it simple**

We live, as I have often observed, in an age of information overload, and it is rapidly becoming worse. A book on treating warts runs to three hundred pages! I'm being flippant of course, but this is not too far removed from the truth. I recently did a course in mindfulness – a remedy for the human condition currently enjoying some popularity – which is fundamentally a straightforward practice. We were given a set of four CDs. The blurb on the cover announced that two further sets are available. We were given a fifth CD toward the end, and the copious printed manual covering the eight nights of the course contained at least one dozen additional short practices. See? Too much information – for me at any rate. When I was teaching communications, I used to pose this question at the end of every lecture: ‘And the golden rule of communication is ...?’ The group would always reply in unison: ‘Keep it simple!’

More than ever, for the sake of my emotional well-being, that is precisely what I need to do.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1049 **Perceptions differ**

I have discovered that the way people perceive me and the way I really am are often quite different. However, I can take quite some time to get to know the inner me. For quite a while I identified only with the outer – the mask I used to wear for the world.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

1050 **Real humanity**

In short, we assume that we are limited, human beings with seldom spiritual experiences when the truth is that we are eternal, spiritual beings with temporary human experiences. When we grasp even a whit of what that signifies, we begin to transcend most of what ails us.

(From ‘Choose A Fabric’, essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

1051 **Far off hills are green – if you can find them**

I want to do something else,
 But I don't know what;
I want to be someone else,
 But I don't know who;
I want to live in another era
 But I don't know when;
I want to go somewhere else,
 But I don't know where.
I have a yen for a new belief system,
 But I don't know which;
I want to break through this wall of unknowing,
 But I don't know how.

The fundamental problem,
As should be pretty bloody obvious by now,
Is that I just don't know;
And the ultimate frustration is:
I don't know why!

(‘Frustration’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

1052 **A book that was a lifeline**

‘The Power Of Light’ is dedicated, in gratitude, to Teresa of Ávila, whose writings and work (together with those of John of the Cross) were the subject of *The Dark Night Of The Soul* by Gerald G. May. This book, far more than any other I have ever read, cast a powerful light into my life at a time when I badly needed it. There is a short review of the book in another of my privately produced volumes, *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn.

(From the Introduction to *The Power Of Light*)

1053 **Not controlling other people, things or situations**

Could I but learn ...
In all my life,
That that which I would most dearly keep,
I must be willing to let go.

(From ‘A Wing And A Prayer’, poem in *Hang On!*)

1054 **Moving on**

‘Lucille, I was going to talk to Fred, but he’s in cranky humour this morning, and, to tell the truth, I need a shoulder ...’

‘Cry on mine,’ she invited sympathetically.

‘My two eldest sons have just flown the nest, one yesterday and one the day before. I thought I’d be glad to have a quieter house, but the fact is I miss them terribly. It seems like only yesterday they were in nappies, now they’re men of the world – well, more or less. I am jolly glad that the nappy stage is solidly ensconced in the past, but ... but ...’

‘... But you miss them most now because you can converse with them as equals, as men.’

‘Quite right, Lucille. There are times when I still have to issue an edict or two to keep them on the straight and narrow, but yes, they’re good adult company now.’

(From ‘Echo’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1055 **Transition**

Since moving into what must almost certainly be the last quarter of my earthly life, my external horizon has come closer and my outer experiences have become more limited. But my internal horizon stretches further and further into eternity and my inner experiences – composed of a breathtaking and ineffable beauty – multiply way beyond my wildest expectations.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1056 **Overload**

Everybody’s at it this winter:
My eldest is doing his degree,
My second is doing his diploma,
My daughter is doing her leaving cert.,
My youngest is doing his junior cert.,
My wife is doing her insurance exams ...
And I am doing my nut.

(‘Everybody’s Doing It’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

1057 **Steadfast love**

Steadfast love
Knows neither time nor space,
Considers neither good nor evil,
Sees only, without condemnation,
The object of its devotion,
A love which comes,
In rare moments of grace,
To some,
But abides each day, every moment and to eternity –
And this my greatest hope –
In the One to whom I have entrusted my heart.

(‘Steadfast Love’, poem in *Hang On!*)

1058 **Antidote to troublesome emotions**

‘The only way to get these confounded emotions to toe the line is to bring the sense of humour on duty – twenty-four hours a day if necessary – and laugh your way through the current emergency. There is nothing like a good giggle to beat a crisis. My recommendation is based loosely on the postulation that the emotions and body ... are intimately linked.’

(From ‘The Proof Of The Pudding ...’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1059 **Who can understand God’s ways?**

No reply was your answer
To my latest, heartfelt prayer,
As to many prayers before,
And I am cranky and out of sorts.
These long silences are inexplicable
And beyond justification,
Though I must acknowledge
That my intellect is finite
And cannot decode the Divine.
So, doubtless, you have reasons.

(From ‘Eloquence’, poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

1060 **The end of an era of (relatively) safe driving**

Our city fathers have, in recent years, and in their benevolent indulgence, provided a multitude of roundabouts where the normally sane motorist is permitted, even encouraged, to go berserk. At an early stage of the planning process, exemption from on high was sought and obtained from the Rules of the Road for all who would summon up sufficient courage to enter these flat substitutes for the wall of death.

For the uninitiated, the fundamental purpose of the exercise, but one of which some participants are still blissfully ignorant, thus adding an additional dimension to the fun, is to proceed, as rapidly as possible, and preferably on two wheels in the wrong direction, totally ignoring lane discipline which, as you are aware, scarcely functions on normal thoroughfares but is totally suspended once you enter the circle.

(From 'Roundabouts', story in *In My Write Mind*)

1061 **Struggle to be honest with oneself**

'Beats me, Lucille. Life is very confusing. It is so difficult to be rigorously honest with oneself, isn't it? I was just saying to a colleague this morning that I like the work I do, but I hate the stress it puts me under. Now that I review that conversation, I find that the truth is that I *don't* really like the work I do at all. Not any more, at least; I used to love it, but now it's draining my limited energies, and I no longer find solace being closeted with juveniles for hours on end, attempting to enlighten the young twerps.'

(From 'Vain Fantasy', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1062 **To be remembered in times of trouble**

And I recall your simple message,
Whispered oft in tribulation,
That, no matter what deep turmoil
Or the semblance on the surface,
All is well.

(From 'Black On Magenta', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

1063 **How I know that faith is a gift**

My purely human trust in God just will not do. If I rely on human trust, I will expect my specification to be observed in the way he deals with me, because human trust is necessarily limited and is based on limited, human 'wisdom' which always has finite expectations. Also it is highly volatile; it ebbs and flows. But the trust (faith) that comes from God sets me free to trust him regardless of the circumstances, which means that, despite all and any appearances to the contrary, I am reassured, deep within, that all is well. And I *know* that such a faith is beyond my human capacity. And being human, I cannot expect consciously to have this kind of faith all the time. There have been times when I believed nothing. Yet, deep in my spirit, I believe that this given faith has never deserted me. In fact now it's less faith, more knowledge.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1064 **No end**

We tend to think and talk in terms of beginnings and ends, particularly ends – like death. But where there is true love, there is no end.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1065 **A touch of French**

Tu vois, je n'arrive pas
A exprimer un amour
Au delà du monde connu;
Mais, au moins, je peux te dire
En l'amour les mots s'envolent,
Vu que toi, t'es sans pareil,
Avec toi mes rêves s'éveillent
Mais ma voix oublie son rôle;
Chère Thérèse, tu me conseilles;
Je te cède, donc, la parole ...

(From 'Je Te Cède La Parole', poem in
Till The Last Day Of Forever)

1066 **A touch of Italian**

Quante volte ti ho cercata,
Tutti i giorni,
In ogni momento,
Amore mio;
Ma quante volte ti ho perduta,
Cioè, ho così spesso creduto
Nell'illusione della mia vita –
In apparenza un'esistenza
Senza di te.
Oh, che dolore!

(From 'Quante Volte Ti Ho Cercata', poem in
Yearning For The Horizon)

1067 **A touch of German**

Ich denke an dich mit Rücksicht
Und schätze dich aus Fernsicht.
Ich folge dir mit Umsicht,
 Und frage mich wohl warum?
Zu wissen ist die Absicht;
Die Antwort kommt aus Nachsicht;
Und braucht nun keine Aufsicht:
 Ich liebe dich vor allem.
Eine Frage kommt aus Durchsicht
(Ich bin zwar dieser Ansicht):
Was wäre dann die Aussicht?
 Ich weiß nicht; also Vorsicht!

(‘Vorsicht!’, poem in *Overdoing It!*)

1068 **Purely platonic**

No; vain fantasy! Muses never become enamoured of their writers. They are far too professional to commit such a folly. Besides, the Muses' Code of Practice frowns on all that sort of thing.

(From 'Vain Fantasy', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1069 **What are prayer, meditation and contemplation?**

- ✧ ‘Prayer, my beloved one, is our love shared.’
- ✧ ‘Meditation is quality time with me.’
- ✧ ‘Contemplation means those moments of sublime sweetness that come as pure gift from me.’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1070 **We can’t do it alone**

Doing battle with the inner foe
From my own confined resources
Is like striving to stop a tidal wave
With the cover of a cooking pot
Or trying to cure malaria
With a spoon of cider vinegar.

(From ‘Calling in Reinforcements’, poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

1071 **Iconoclast**

A number of years ago, a courageous – some would say misguided – radio presenter invited me to participate in a live, hour-long discussion with one other writer and three artists. He decided to open the proceedings by trying to create, as I saw it, a bit of controversy: ‘What would you say to those who assert that poetry is remote and inaccessible?’ Presumably, with a view to entertaining his listeners, he was hoping to provoke the righteous indignation of the poetic soul. The strategy failed, because I smirked and responded, in a tone of levity, ‘I’d say they’re right!’

(From ‘Bemused’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1072 **Easier said than done**

Of evil money is the root,
Or that is what they say,
But when you’re somewhat short of loot,
It’s hard to think that way.

(From ‘Money’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

1073 **Does knowledge of God mean there is never doubt?**

Does this incontrovertible knowledge mean that I never doubt? Not at all. There are dark hours when I do doubt what I know. But this is to be expected. Take something which everybody knows, I presume, namely that they exist. I look in a mirror and see that I have a tangible body; in addition I can feel it and I know that some force animates that body. How could I doubt it? Yet in rare moments of great emotional turmoil, especially if I am physically out of joint at the same time, I have briefly wondered if I really exist or am just a figment of my own or somebody else's imagination!* Thankfully such interludes are pure illusion and never last for long. Likewise my moments of doubt about spiritual knowledge are pure illusion and never last for long – and I am deeply grateful for that.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* My poem 'Nothing' in *Homage To A Future Hero* is a light-hearted view of this matter.

1074 **At times spirituality is inscrutable**

If you have experienced a deep inner spirituality that nurtures you beyond what you could have thought possible, even though frequently painful, then you understand the paradoxical blend of miracle and misery that can leave you bewildered.

(From 'The Dark Night Of The Soul –
Book Review' in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

1075 **A small price?**

As I have said so many times, in the spiritual realm I am *never* alone, but on the human plane I can feel isolated at times. Given what I have received in the spiritual realm, however, that is a very small price to pay. Actually that's just a figure of speech; I don't pay any price; it is all absolutely free and unconditional.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1076 **Fred spots the flaw in my statement**

‘Not every day one reaches the jolly old half century, bosom pal. Nice to celebrate it in some way.’

‘Yes, really nice,’ he agreed.

‘And Fred, I don’t like boasting, but things said privately between us don’t really constitute vanity: that was a fantastic speech we made. Went down a treat. Standing ovation and so forth.’

‘Um, yes; fantastic; ovation unquestionably of the standing variety, but that’s because it was a buffet, and everybody was standing anyway.’

(From ‘Half Century’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1077 **The spirit is willing ...**

Nothing is too much for him to ask of me – nothing. It’s just that at times he seems to be asking more of me than I am capable of giving ...

What has become abundantly clear to me since writing the above is that the *only* thing My God asks of me is to receive his infinite, steadfast, unconditional love. I may assume, because of the pain and trauma of the human condition, that much is sometimes asked of me, but my clarity remains unaltered: the *only* thing God ever asks of me is to receive his love. Everything else emanates from my unconditional acceptance of that love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1078 **Off course**

Adrift in uncharted waters
In the dreaded dead of night,
I am naked, cold and all alone,
And countless miles off course,
No longer in delusion
That I’m in the right direction
And where I’m meant to be.

(From ‘Mayday!’, poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

1079 **Isn't that nice!**

'What a handsome clock,' remarked Lucille, admiringly.

'Yes isn't it, and there's a story behind it, too. My lady wife's two brothers bought that clock for their mother, many moons ago, out of their very first wage packets. Gesture of love and gratitude.'

'Aah, isn't that nice!' said Lucille

'Yes, isn't it? For many years, however, it has been resident in our house, and has suffered ignominiously from the insensitive tamperings of curious children, anxious to fathom the mysteries of its workings, losing first its glass front, then its hands and finally its ability to function at all, poor thing. So I have had it painstakingly restored, as a surprise, to present to my aforementioned lady wife on the occasion of her birthday in two weeks' time.'

'Aah, isn't that nice!' said Lucille.

'Yes, isn't it? I was rather chuffed when the idea came to me. This is one of those 'big' birthdays, though I have been strictly admonished not say which one, and I was looking for something special – something nostalgic – to celebrate the great occasion. On the day itself, the clock will be positioned on the mantelpiece in the family sitting-room, whither I shall direct the birthday girl on some pretext, so that she may behold same and make suitable noises of rapture, joy, and so forth. In addition, a bottle of her favourite perfume will be positioned behind the timepiece, and the ensemble will be completed by a red rose in a single-stem vase.'

'Aah, isn't that nice!' said Lucille.

(From 'Time Piece', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1080 **Doing one's best means ...**

Doing my best does not mean doing my 'most'. Best recognises that I am a human being with faults and failings, strengths and weaknesses. Most means struggling to get it right (e.g. people-pleasing, working non-stop) all the time even though it may cost me my health or my sanity.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

1081 **On being stood up**

‘Yes, thank you;
Perhaps just one more cup, then.’
But the appointed time has come and gone,
And with it my hope of seeing you,
Of hearing words of affection from your lips.
There is little point in waiting longer,
Anticipating a lovers’ tryst –
That’s what they call it, is it not?
Nevertheless, I linger,
Absently sipping tea that I don’t want,
Holding on to the vestiges of a tattered fantasy,
The truth dawning slowly.

(From ‘Tea For One’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

1082 **The right motivation?**

Can anybody convince me that so-called westernised culture, in the mode in which it persuades women to dress and the ways in which it uses the female body to market all sorts of products and services, has as its primary motivation the displaying – for the nurturing of all – the beauty and wonder of God’s creation?

I can hear the guffaws all around me! It doesn’t take a social scientist to point out that one of the best ways to sell everything from perfume to washing powder and from tractors to sewer pipes is to make the female form as provocative as possible, within what few parameters are left. See, that’s the motivation, and if you succeed in making the female body provocative, you succeed in provoking.

(From ‘Femininity, Modesty And More’, essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

1083 **Cheap at the price**

Lately, when I see a product that is unbelievably good value, I find myself thinking, ‘Who’s not getting adequately paid here?’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1084 **Too late**

Adam, one day broaching the disaster
Occasioned by an apple that he ate,
Moaned to Eve: 'You could have copped on faster –
Before I took the bite that sealed our fate.'

(From 'Adam Laments', poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

1085 **A question for that time of life**

'Well, Fred, there you have it: farewell party accomplished, painting duly attached to wall, crystal placed on shelf, thank you letters despatched, and five days of official retirement under our belt, which leaves only one burning issue to be resolved.'

'Namely?'

'What do we do now? To put it another way, where do we go from here?'

'I don't know; I thought you'd have all that figured out.'

'What! You myopic, feeble-minded clod! I thought you would have it all figured out, for God's sake. I was operating under the assumption that, while I was sorting out pension, taxes and so forth, you would have been beavering away at the strategic end of things, evolving a plan for my inspection. Am I to understand that you have nothing to report?'

'Absolutely nothing,' said Fred sulkily.

(From 'What Now?', story in *Life With Fred*)

1086 **Being heard**

When I received your latest letter I felt that, in an ideal world, I would just like to be sitting in a room with you, listening to what you, in this instance, had to write rather than speak, and you would know just by looking in my eyes that I empathised with every word you had said. I believe it would be one of those privileged occasions when one friend would just share from the heart and by a single look at the other would be able to say softly inside, 'I have been heard.'

(From a letter, April 2006)

1087 **Procrastination**

And have you noticed? It's certainly true of my use of language anyway. Whenever I say 'I must do this sometime' or 'I must do that sometime' it really means that I am going to put it on the long finger or, more frequently, that I haven't the slightest intention of doing it in the first place. I'm sure you know the sort of thing: you meet a casual acquaintance in the street and, at the conclusion of the meaningless small talk, one says 'Must meet for a coffee sometime' and the other says 'Yes, let's.' Neither is the slightest bit interested in the rendezvous and it never takes place. I can claim no dispensation from such displays of social hypocrisy; my life is liberally strewn with unachieved 'I-must-do-that-sometimes'.

(From 'Keep Your Distance', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1088 **Identity**

Once, when I gazed in the looking glass,
I saw but an ageing me
With a frightened three-year-old inside,
Till you gave me sight to see.
 Now, when I gaze in the looking glass,
 I see your reflection sublime,
 And when my bewildered face you behold,
 It's your love you see, not mine.
For I am all a reflection of you,
And more am I destined to be;
And when this perception goes deep in my heart,
Only then am I truly me.

(‘Identity’, poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

1089 **The value of uncertainty**

... I am never totally sure of where I am. For this uncertainty I am immensely grateful, because it means that I am totally reliant on God to guide me, step by step, in the path that is right for me.

(From 'Afterword', *Perspectives*, 3rd edn)

1090 **No sex please!**

‘At times,’ concluded Lucille, ‘sex brings us the indescribably heightened awareness of being one – body, mind and spirit – with another being and, at others, engenders feelings of total rejection. The challenge we face, then, is to strike a balance but, even more importantly, to determine what attitude to have to sexuality in those poignant moments when it seems more of a dilemma than a delight.’

(From ‘Present And Correct’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1091 **Grief – the best way out is through**

Grief is not an evil or some kind of disease. It is a normal part of healthy living, a safety valve for me to use in times of loss. So I will give myself permission to shout and cry for as long as it takes to get through it, and find relative peace at the other end. And I will avoid, like the plague, those well-meaning but often dangerous people who think that my problems are the result of a Valium deficiency!

(From Part 4 of *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*, 3rd edn)

1092 **A happy child**

Something my father recounted to me as an adult came back to me only recently. I have no memory of this but my father told me that, as a child, I used to say, ‘Daddy, I don’t want to grow up.’ When he asked me why, I answered, ‘Because I am so happy.’

I have often wondered if my memories of happy childhood were just euphoric recall. It seems, on the basis of this information, that they are absolutely spot on. Thank God.

As an aside, but a relevant one, I have sometimes heard it stated that adults who have a difficult time in the present because of events in the past, need to re-parent the child within. I’m just wondering, in my case, if it’s the happy child within who should re-parent the adult! Now, there’s a thought!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1093 **Give it a go**

Anyway I got home, checked my email and there was one from my eldest son who lives in Holland. It contained a series of quotations from a guy called Dave Barry, and this one caught my eye:

Never be afraid to try something new. Remember that a lone amateur built the Ark. A large group of professionals built the Titanic!

(From a letter, November 2003)

1094 **Why am I left-handed?**

‘You know something? I never thought to ask you: why are you left-handed?’

‘Lucille! It’s not like you to ask silly questions. How should I know? Fate, genetic factors, the relative positions of the planets when I was born, weak muscles in my right hand when I was learning to write; perhaps I got it from you or maybe I just wanted to be different. Who can tell?’

‘Actually it was a kind of rhetorical question. I know the answer. I just wanted to see if you knew.’

‘As aforesaid, I haven’t a clue.’

‘It’s because all geniuses are left-handed.’

‘Well, that’s a very flattering thing to say, dearest Muse. I would never have thought of myself as a ...’ At this point, the penny dropped, and I paused for thought. ‘Hmmm! So all geniuses are left-handed, are they? That presumably does *not* mean that all left-handers are geniuses!’

(From ‘Sheer Genius’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1095 **I can’t hide anything from Fred**

‘It’s no use,’ I said to myself a few minutes and several sips later. ‘I just can’t hide anything from Fred, try as I might. If politicians were as transparent to the general public as I am to the resident bollocks, the country wouldn’t be in half the mess it’s in.’

(From ‘Transparent’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1096 **Speak no evil**

I write primarily for my own enjoyment but if you find one or two pieces in this collection that give you pleasure, that will be a welcome bonus, as will be your restraint in keeping it to yourself if you think it's a load of garbage!

(From the Introduction to *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1097 **Lowering my sights**

I was brought up on a diet of saints and martyrs, men and women who suffered and often paid the ultimate price to follow God. Even Thomas More, whom I admire greatly because of his humour, integrity, simplicity and family values,* always wore a hair shirt next to his skin to humble himself, and was ultimately martyred. Small wonder that I picked up the message that if I finally surrender to God's will, that is tantamount to giving him permission to make me suffer even more. I cannot aspire to that kind of sacrifice and heroism. I'd really like to hear a lot more about ordinary men and women with ordinary jobs in ordinary circumstances who, while making a mess of all sorts of things, kept their eyes on God, however falteringly, and blundered their way into heaven nevertheless.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* Although I acknowledge that he wasn't perfect. There was a dark side to his character, as there is to everybody's.

1098 **Fred speaks wisdom**

'Whaddya mean?' I retorted, while reluctantly beginning to concede to myself that there was something in what he had just said.

'Just this: you are falling into the age-old trap of wanting an intellectual explanation for everything. We were given a finite human intellect to deal with finite human situations. When we attempt to press it into service to decipher the spiritual, we walk straight into a brick wall.'

(From 'There You Have It', story in *Life With Fred*)

1099 **A visit to the doctor or mind your health**

Having prodded, probed and stethoscoped, then interrogated me unsparingly on my lifestyle, he pointed out, somewhat in the manner of a schoolmaster admonishing a delinquent pupil, that the members of the corporeal ensemble were complaining bitterly about my abysmal treatment of them and were threatening to go on strike unless conditions improved.

(From 'Organs Galore', story in *In My Write Mind*)

1100 **The intellect as the arbiter of reality?**

In terms of comprehending or explaining the *true* reality, the intellect, beyond acknowledging what is revealed in the spiritual realm and making a very basic attempt to describe it, is virtually worthless. I am blessed to have a reasonably well-developed intellect and regard it as a valued gift. But, in the domain of which I speak, it's finest achievement is to have figured out that I cannot use it to figure anything out.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* For a fuller treatment of this topic, see the essay 'Reality And Illusion' in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn.

1101 **Big words, big meaning**

'That's it!' I said mournfully. 'That has to be it. That's the only possible way to explain it – to explain the monumental disorientation which has, in recent times, imposed itself surreptitiously upon my unsuspecting person: I have a duplicitous psyche.'

'Come again?' said Fred, using a well-known transatlantic expression.

'Oh, hello, Fred,' I responded, equally mournfully. 'I didn't know you were listening. I was just saying that I probably have a duplicitous psyche.'

'A dupl ... duplic ...! What the hell's that, when it's at home? More of that fancy, incomprehensible jargon you throw about the place like confetti at all too regular intervals?'

(From 'What's In A Name?', story in *Life With Fred*)

1102 **Can God do anything?**

The Bible (Luke 1:37) tells us that nothing is impossible to God. This is actually not true. God is 'limited' by his limitless love. He can do only that which is born out of infinite, steadfast, unconditional love. Which admittedly gives him a lot of scope!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1103 **Enough is enough**

The farmer prunes this rambling vine
That it may bear more fruit.
This seems a pretty loony scheme;
It cannot work, to boot.
There is so little left of me,
I know from reminiscing
That if he prunes me any more,
I'll be reported missing.

(‘Overdoing It’, poem in *Overdoing It!*)

1104 **Negative influences and difficult circumstances**

For some reason, I don't have a desire to go into this topic in much detail, but I feel that this much is worth saying nevertheless. Negative influences can be destructive in my life, particularly when they are an 'inside job' – that is, when I feed myself with negative thoughts and attitudes that generate resentments, anger and any number of other defeatist emotions. They can affect my body, mind and spirit adversely.

Difficult circumstances, on the other hand, are just that and nothing more. If my thoughts and attitudes are in healthy alignment, difficult circumstance are, in my own experience, always the gateway to positive growth, particularly spiritual growth. Thus, this is an appropriate place to repeat what I have said – and meant – many times before: in my life, pain is the soil in which the miracles grow.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1105 **I need to lighten up – maybe we all do**

I have a very good sense of humour and enjoy a good laugh, but just going out to have good, clean, childlike fun seems to be really difficult for me. I am too damn serious for my own good. And you know, I have been aware for years that there is a three-year-old inside me who desperately needs to have fun and a fourteen-year-old who wants to have a normal, preposterous teenage.

(From a letter, October 2003)

1106 **Delving**

I was struggling, definitely struggling.

‘Lucille, I don’t think this poem is going to work out; as a matter of fact I’m sure of it. Your idea was brilliant – recalling a memory for each of the last fifty years, and then fashioning them one by one into rhyming couplets – but the initial listing process has unearthed too many old hurts and sorrows, opened up too many long-healed and barely-healed wounds. Not to put a tooth in it, old thing, I’m in bits.’

‘It is inevitable,’ she said; gently; ‘one cannot dig up the soil without uncovering the worms. I knew we were taking that risk when I prompted the piece, but it was worth it, I believe.’

(From ‘Doctor Lucille’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1107 **No turning back**

I’ve come too far, I can’t go back;
I’ve seen beyond, I’ve known no lack,
 For the road I chose is you
Whose steadfast love e’er draws me on,
Who makes it clear the past is gone
 And there’s nowhere to go back to.
And so, beguiled, I’ll run the race
Till I am safe in your embrace,
 For that’s what love must do.

(‘Home Sweet Home’, poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

1108 **Spontaneous serenity**

‘Please ... could you go into the cathedral, beyond the bridge. That’s where I meant. Please? There are some important things I want to know.’

Well, to tell the truth, I was a bit reluctant.

‘Fred’ I responded, with equal politeness, ‘it’s a nice place, but God isn’t found in a building, you know.’

‘Please ...’

‘All right, if it’s important to you, bosom friend.’

To my surprise, I became unexpectedly thankful, for, as I entered the large stone building, I experienced a wonderful sensation of peace which transcended religious sentiment and traditional observance. Fred and I sat on a bench, facing the altar, in the quiet, in the spirit, in peace, in unrehearsed meditation for a long but timeless while, which yet seemed like a fleeting moment.

(From ‘You Said It!’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1109 **Letting go**

Eventually I had to give myself a talking to and remind myself that I know from experience that when God closes one door, he always opens another, but usually not in my way and time.

(From a letter, November 2005)

1110 **Feelings versus reason**

I have often heard it said that feelings are not facts, as if they are to be ignored and our lives are to be lived solely by the power of reason and logic. What drive! At any given moment, it is a fact that I am feeling a certain way. It is of course unwise to make decisions on the basis of fleeting emotions, for feelings are mostly subjective facts, not objective ones, but I have come to realise – even though it has taken me a long time – that the type of feeling which is often described as ‘intuition’ is always far more reliable than any analysis of rational information. And that’s a fact!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1111 **Ploughing a lone furrow**

I have been wondering for a while if I am not being somewhat reclusive where my writing is concerned. Not to create an inaccurate impression, I should point out that I give the stuff away in bucketfuls and give it unconditionally; there are thousands of copies of my privately produced books in circulation, and countless copies of individual pieces, but I do not immerse myself in the company of fellow writers or hobnob with the literati.

This evening, therefore, I made one of my rare literary sorties and attended the first night of a seven-night poetry workshop. It was very worthwhile if for no other reason than that it convinced me not to go to the remaining six.

(From 'For Whom?', essay in *When The Bug Bites*)

1112 **When a search is not a search**

For many a year I searched,
Unrecognised by my heart,
For what I already possessed,
And felt the quest an anguish ...
Yet 'twas neither search nor anguish
For there is no fraught condition,
But a deep and soulful yearning
For more of what I'd found ...

(From 'Eternal Flame', poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

1113 **Consulting Fred reluctantly**

As a last resort, I had decided to consult Fred – not a palatable option at the best of times, since, on any occasion in the past that I had been obliged to bow to his superior wisdom I suppose one might reluctantly call it, he had either become cockily arrogant for knowing better than me, or else hadn't the foggiest clue, and remained infuriatingly silent. At all events, the time had come when, at last, I was at the end of my tether, so had few, if any, alternative paths to pursue.

(From 'Simplicity', story in *Life With Fred*)

1114 **Lucille in rare assertive mood**

‘Lucille,’ I said, embarrassed but resolute, ‘I can no longer remain silent, so I shall come straight to the point. Though many months have passed, I am still decidedly piqued at your instantaneous and improper chumminess with Fred, on the occasion on which I introduced you to him. I recall vividly that you hobnobbed with him in an unseemly manner, pretty much ignoring me in the process. I am still in a state of shock, graphically evidenced by the fact that we have produced less than fifty pieces in the intervening twelve months. I mean I thought you were the very soul of loyalty, but the instant you get a sniff of ...’

‘Rampant jealousy!’ interrupted Lucille.

‘Er ... um ... that is to say ... yes; well, er ... possibly,’ I mumbled.

‘There is no need to answer. I was making a statement, not asking a question,’ said my Muse, in uncharacteristically assertive mood.

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Also lamentable forgetfulness,’ she went on.

‘Ah,’ I said.

‘Not to mention deplorable ingratitude.’

‘Huh?’

‘You are forgetting, perhaps, that in asking to meet Fred, I said that it would help me to help you if I were to be personally acquainted with him.’

(From ‘Back To The Future’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1115 **Love will see me through**

In the black of night,
No hope, no light,
When I’m sure there is no You,
I still reach out
Despite all doubt,
For that’s what love must do.
And Love will see me through.

(‘Beyond Belief’, poem in *The Power Of Light*)

1116 **Tell it like it is – to God**

In prayer, there's no place for bad taste or profanity;
The language should always be elevated;
But surely that's just sanctimonious vanity
Where the truth's been perverted and relegated.
The truth, say the scriptures, will e'er set me free,
Which means that the truth I must state,
And, while being up front is quite my cup of tea,
There's something I've settled of late:
Frankness is fine, but keep swearwords at bay,
Though there's one which, I fear, can't be ducked –
If you don't defend and protect me today,
Oh God up in heaven, I'm fucked.

(‘Up Front’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

1117 **Even lecturers can have an off day**

Fred did his very best to keep my motivation at its hitherto elevated level: ‘Go on ... continue to pursue your high calling to plant pearls of wisdom in their impressionable young ears.’

‘Knock it off, Fred!’ I said, acidly. ‘Right now my preference would be to plant my size twelve boot solidly up their impressionable young arseholes and shove their half-baked, sketchy notes of my painstakingly prepared lectures down their impressionable young throats ...’

(From ‘Exit’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1118 **Fact or fiction?**

The more I read and hear and observe in the world around me, the more I have become imbued with the perception that information (all too often delineated as ‘incontrovertible fact’) is capable of being manipulated to support or ‘prove’ vastly different – often diametrically opposing – viewpoints. Historical information, which is almost always written by the ‘winners’, appears particularly vulnerable to falsification, fabrication, forgery and sheer fantasy.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1119 **Objecting to a proposed development**

Given the history – the very emotive history – of the deforestation of Ireland over centuries, it seems inconceivable to me that the granting of planning permission, which would destroy one of only two mature broadleaf woodlands in the city, should even be considered. The fact that your good selves have refused permission on two occasions already is cause for hope, but the developers seem very tenacious in their quest. I trust that you will once again be of the opinion that this wood is a delightful amenity for the city and should be preserved in its entirety in its present state.

(From a letter, May 2000)

1120 **Sweet tooth**

I was pouring a second cup of tea with one hand and licking fresh cream and chocolate off the fingers of the other.

‘Scrumptious! Delicious gâteau that; I think I’ll have another slice, although I wish I didn’t have such a sweet tooth. Bad for the figure and other things too no doubt. I mean, a little of what you fancy does you good but I have a regrettable tendency to absorb rather too much of what I fancy. What’s that old saying? Oh yes – everything I like is either illegal, immoral, or fattening!’

(From ‘A Little Of What You Fancy’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1121 **Doubt is a part of the human condition**

Now and again, because spiritual sight and knowledge operate in a completely different realm to the material world, I can have passing doubts about the authenticity of my experience. I am not alone; this doubt has been a part of the spiritual journey for men and women since time began. Those who have been declared saints have not been immune from this doubt; indeed many of them seem to have suffered agonies from it, not the least my beloved Thérèse of Lisieux. It need be no cause for undue concern.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1122 **Love affects people strangely**

Er ... I don't know whether I should share this with you or not; talking about it makes me feel strangely vulnerable and, well ... Oh, to hell with prudence; I badly need a listening ear, and I'd value a woman's, especially yours, as I feel you might be able to offer appropriate counsel in my dilemma. You see, I am preposterously, illogically, in love with this woman – I'd rather not mention her name, if you don't mind – but I just cannot bring myself to tell her. I'm certain she doesn't reciprocate my sentiments; so, not wishing to suffer the humiliation of rejection, I find myself involuntarily protected by some inner sentinel which keeps a close guard on my vocal cords. Every time I almost pluck up the courage to broach the subject, she seems to have the unhappy knack, even with a single glance, of knocking me off my perch, and I just sit there with ruffled feathers and a stupid grin on my face like a lovesick parrot with chronic laryngitis.

(From 'Snap!', story in *In My Write Mind*)

1123 **Offering hope**

I would like to offer some hope: if you can find, somewhere within yourself, a willingness to let go of old ideas, you will surely discover the wonder I am talking about here and in many of my other writings.

(From 'Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II',
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

1124 **Tug of war**

One aspect of the tug of war that can go on inside me is that I am torn between living in the world with all its attractions, to being drawn to a simpler life in the spirit of God. One example: one part of me wants to invest in the latest computer technology so that I can keep up to date – don't want to get left behind. Another part of me just wants it all to go away and leave me in simple, uncluttered peace.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1125 **Honesty**

Usually, when we think of ourselves or others as honest or dishonest, we are thinking in terms of material possessions, especially money. If we have the right values, we don't want to succumb to the temptation to steal or cheat, to 'borrow' money we have no intention of paying back, pad the expense account, say nothing when the cashier gives us too much change, or indulge in any number of other sharp practices.

But there is another type of honesty which is even more serious because it can cause serious problems in and of itself, and the items listed above can emanate from it. And that is dishonesty of motive. Every night, when I am reviewing my day, I ask myself, 'Did I do anything for the wrong reason?' And I pay heed to the answer, taking corrective action if appropriate.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1126 **Listening**

When I have lost direction,
And my heart is in confusion,
As I move through light and shadow
To my final destination,
I repose awhile, then sharpen
Every sense but, most, my spirit,
So to listen for your guidance;
And I hear you in the stillness ...

(From 'Perfect Eloquence', poem in *Beautiful In Everything*)

1127 **Great freedom**

Above all, after a long and sometimes circuitous journey, I am experiencing the freedom of a much more expansive view of faith in and – much more importantly – a personal relationship with God, a freedom which leaves me relying less and less on outside sources, no matter how inspiring, and increasingly finding most of what I need deep within.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1128 **Analysis**

The pain of life is like a giant onion,
Its rueful sting concealed behind its sheath;
I peel away one tearful, irksome membrane,
To find another lurking underneath.

But folks like me are nothing if not stoic,
Endure all things to get beyond the strife;
So I strip away each sad successive layer,
To find, one day, I've peeled away my life.

(‘Sob Story’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1129 **Why did I start writing?**

‘I can’t imagine why I started to write – “creatively” I suppose one might call it if one were in a generous frame of mind. Right up to the time I composed line one, poem one, I never much liked the stuff myself and, as far as grasping the fundamentals of metre, poetic convention and so forth is concerned, suffice it to say that my English teacher was tempted to resign in despair. In fact, not to put a tooth in it (which is a most appropriate expression, since I have just learned that a single crown is about to cost me the outrageous sum of four hundred quid), I am more or less poetically illiterate.’

(From ‘One Man’s Meat ...’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1130 **In praise of shepherds**

‘... being a shepherd, an occupation looked down on by many, must be one of the most difficult jobs on the planet. Imagine sitting on a grassy hillock, sipping a mug of whatever it is that shepherds sip, and then scurrying all over the meadow, trying to gather about six hundred and seventy-three of the lovable, woolly but utterly muddle-headed little blighters. The mind boggles at the prospect. At least, resident sage, the current discussion has borne fruit in one worthwhile respect: I have acquired a decided admiration for shepherds.’

(From ‘Shepherds’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1131 **Love and freedom**

My heart overflows with gratitude when I see how the God Of My Life has slowly, and in the painstakingly detailed strategic management of my life, brought me away from that false and incredibly limiting message (and continues to do so) into a revelation of himself that blows me away with astonishment and wonder. He has worked countless miracles in my life, has infused me with an intensity of divine love that I could not have believed existed, surrounded me with protection on every side, has *never* asked anything of me in return, and constantly whispers words of love in my ear.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1132 **Appreciating a gift**

What can I say? I was overwhelmed by your gift of your husband's watch, and the thought that prompted you to send it – my love of eagles [the watch had an eagle embossed on it]. It's beautiful and I will always treasure it. It lies on my desk and I have quickly got into the habit of opening it to see the time, even when I don't need to know the time! It has a certain air of another era about it, even though it is modern, and the fact that you were able to part with it so soon after losing him makes it doubly special.

(From a letter, June 1994)

1133 **I like airports**

'We're very early, aren't we?'

'Yes we are, Lucille, but I really like airports, and I am quite happy to sit here and watch the world go by. Besides, it's never wise to leave it till the last minute to check in; leaves me on edge. You never know when you're going to get stuck in traffic and miss the flight. So, here we are with loads of time to spare ... Could I have another coffee, please?' I called to a passing staff member. 'How about you, Lucille?'

'You know me, I only drink nectar.'

(From 'Noticed Anything?: Part 1', story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1134 **Expectations**

An unrealistic expectation, that is one which is unlikely to be fulfilled, is a resentment in the making. Indeed, even realistic expectations can be dicey sometimes, because many people do not do what they say they are going to do even in relation to ordinary, daily things like being on time for an appointment, leaving me once again open to resentment, however minor.

When all is said and done, the only realistic expectation is that, no matter what life presents to me, I will be loved unconditionally through it all by the only One who really matters.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1135 **Being kind to oneself**

Thinking back over our conversations, I feel that one of the most important things I said was to take care of yourself – to look after the little girl deep inside. I don't mean being selfish, rather to do and be things that are healthy, wholesome and life-giving for you. You will become more at ease with yourself, and those around you will benefit too. I have discovered that if I am not kind to myself, others being kind to me doesn't have the same effect.

(From a letter, June 2013)

1136 **I'm wide awake!**

Lucille sighed. She felt, I think, that I was definitely not getting her drift. Usually, I twig like greased lightning.

'You mean, perhaps,' I said, after but a moment's reflection, 'that I have developed an intuitive ability to interpret your innermost thoughts – as you have mine – and that although, on the occasion to which you allude, I had a few moments' doubt, I was quickly able to summarise in my own mind the brilliance of your simple postulation.'

'Yes,' she said, taken aback. She had been wrong; I was obviously twiggng at an enormous rate of knots.

(From 'Unfinished Business', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1137 **What is ‘depression’?**

I have deliberately put the word ‘depression’ in inverted commas. It is only a label, not a life sentence, and it means different things to different people at different times. Sometimes, as you will see, I refer to it as ‘It’, leaving each of us to interpret it as something identifiable to be dealt with, not an enormous, threatening, black cloud that would engulf us. For myself, I loosely describe ‘depression’ as a state – which can be extremely painful – where I do not experience the joy of living which is my birthright, and I use the term to include anxiety (a fancy word for fear, which can be crippling), and sometimes confusion and grief.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

1138 **Keeping an open mind**

In the past, when I read or heard somebody else’s philosophy I tended either to soak it all up unquestioningly like a naïve and impressionable infant, or else found one flaw, became blind to the good, and threw the baby out with the bathwater, both extremes causing me to suffer or miss out. On the basis of this experience, therefore, I now try to keep an open mind, but post the sentry of wisdom at the entrance, and that wisdom comes from a realm beyond my Ken!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1139 **Be vigilant**

He [the jackal] was in so much unacknowledged, emotional pain that he had ill-advisedly partaken of and subsequently become addicted to what was known throughout the jungle as the hug-mug berry, so-called quite simply because initially it hugged you, then, having taken you in so to speak, it mugged you. At first it made you feel all warm inside, just like a hug, and all your problems went away. But you quickly became hooked on it, whereupon it turned toxic and kicked you up the rear end, metaphorically speaking ...

(From ‘Jackal And Hide’, fable in *Oh, My Head!*)

1140 **Weather!**

It was pouring with a vengeance, as if the sky wanted to exhaust its entire supply of H₂O before lunch; the wiper blades could scarcely keep up. That alone wasn't really cause for concern because, with the more usual, vertical rain, he could rely on the protection of the trusty golf umbrella which he kept in the boot for the purpose. On this occasion, however, the stuff was bucketing down in tandem with a force eight gale and the net result was water coming at all angles, and the umbrella would be about as effective against the maelstrom as trying to stop a heavy armoured tank with a peashooter, so there was no escape.

(From 'A Short Tale With A Long Tail', story in *Oh, My Head!*)

1141 **What's in a title?**

A word about the title [*That's the Spirit*]. It has a number of connotations. Firstly, there's the more normal meaning of 'attaboy', 'go to it' and similar exhortations to get down to the writing. Secondly, it represents words of commendation (mine!) for a job well done. Thirdly, and most significantly, some of what I write seems to me to come not alone from the mind but from the spirit. I have had the experience a number of times of reading a piece well after its composition to find, often to my amazement, that it is much deeper than I had thought when I was merely assembling the words.

(From the Introduction to *That's The Spirit*)

1142 **No limits on God's love**

My spirit discerns
That my slightest concerns
Are matters of moment to you,
No small thoughts too many,
But worth scarce a penny
You give them the care that is due,
For you place no limits on love ...

(From 'No Limits On Love', poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

1143 **When I'm not well ...**

I have often said that when I am not writing, I'm not well – emotionally speaking that is. It takes only a slight adjustment to the foregoing statement to enable one to conclude that I am not writing *because* I'm not well. A number of times recently, however, the thought has occurred to me that the converse is true, namely that when I am not well, maybe it is, in significant measure, because I'm not writing. Now there's a notion to ponder.

You know something: I feel all the better for having written that!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1144 **Surely that's impossible**

'That is right, David. Standard issue human bodies cannot walk through doors and walls ... I have not explained *how* this is done, simply because human language and intellect would not suffice. But now you know that it is not impossible and that it is certainly not only you who have witnessed this phenomenon. Countless people have done so throughout history.'

(From 'The Dance Goes On', draft sequel to the novel *Black On Magenta*)

1145 **Fred can be gentle when I'm down**

Fred paused, seeming in no hurry, and looking, to my dismay, not the least bit disconcerted. I knew from experience that he has a pretty good sense of timing, and my intuition suggested that he had more to say on the matter, which rendered me distinctly less smug. The intuition was spot on, and he struck at just the moment when he knew that my defences were crumbling. Well, I say 'struck' and that's not strictly correct. His voice, when he spoke, was more one of gentleness and understanding than that of the vanquished who has just found a fatal chink in the victor's armour.

(From 'All Is Not Lost', story in *Life With Fred*)

1146 **Disgraceful!**

‘I thought you might to be interested in some observations I made during a lecture today, Lucille. I was in the process of transferring gems of knowledge to a large assembly of youthful minds with my usual dexterity and panache, when I just happened to notice that two of the female students were attired in low-cut tops. Nothing in that, of course, and it’s of no significance to me, but the reason I mention it is that, at the time, it was minus two degrees Celsius outside, and the inside temperature wouldn’t exactly encourage the flowers to blossom early either. Yet here were these two bimbos blossoming in unseemly abandon, presumably hoping to attract male glances like wasps to a honey pot, the young trollops.’

(From ‘People In Glass Houses’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1147 **Getting angry with God?**

Many people are appalled at the notion of getting angry with God. Small wonder. We have been taught to praise God, glorify him, thank him, pray to him and – in many scriptures – to fear him. This is yet another example of the ways in which we limit God. A great pity. God is the only one with whom it is safe to get angry, the only one who will not retaliate, the only one who always returns our anger with unconditional love. In short, he is the only one who can take it. Many modern therapists advocate healthily expressing our anger in a safe environment. God is it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1148 **A time for silence**

Lucille, as I have observed before – purely objectively, of course – is gorgeous, elegant, gentle, appealing and very sexy, and I was on the point of suggesting what her forte was, but I bit my lip, quashed my disappointment and, with heroic restraint, kept my big mouth shut.

(From ‘A Little Of What You Fancy’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1149 **Letting go and letting God**

Your daughter has been daily in my prayers since you first mentioned this to me, and the prayer continues unchanged, namely that nothing or nobody – especially herself – will stand in the way of God’s loving plan for her life. I pray also that you will be given the strength and the wisdom to know when to be there for her and when to stand back.

(From a letter, March 2004)

1150 **Not living in the now**

Apart from a sprinkling of music, there’s nothing to minister to the drooping spirit like a smidgen of poetry. One evening, while I was thus ministering, I decided to include Lucille in the proceedings: “‘We look before and after, and pine for what is not.’”^{*} Poignant words, pregnant with meaning, Lucille; weighed down with transcendent wisdom, don’t you think? Oh, how we pine for what is not!

(From ‘Wishful Thinking?’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

* Shelley, ‘To A Skylark’.

1151 **With friends like this ...**

‘My friends mustn’t think much of my emotional state of health, Fred. Earlier in the week, while attending a reception to launch a book by a retired pig breeder from Belmullet on the dietary habits of the dappled Peruvian warthog, a bevy of them (friends not warthogs) cornered me and suggested that I might benefit from dream analysis, Progoff journalling, SHEN therapy, rebirthing, grief counselling, esoteric psychology, shock treatment and biodynamic massage, to name but a few. Normally, my better self is disposed to express gratitude for displays of concern for my well-being. On this occasion, however, my better self was submerged beneath an almost irrepressible desire to tell them what to do with themselves in a few well-chosen four-letter words.’

(From ‘Watch It!’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1152 **Work – first things first**

My job (that is the employment which earns me a living), no matter how meaningful or fulfilling, is only a means to an end. My primary purpose, then, is to decide what that end is.

It is my perception that those who see their work as an end in itself experience an impoverished quality of life, not having reaped the benefits of seeing the appropriate place of their job in the cosmic scheme of things. Perhaps this narrow focus on work – or indeed on other transient pursuits – is precisely because many do not believe in a cosmic scheme of things, or do not believe in it sufficiently to let it guide their thoughts and actions.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1153 **God only loves me!**

My poem ‘The River Nymph’* could give the impression that I think God loves me alone. Of course that’s absurd; God loves everyone. However, my experience is that God loves me so intensely and so personally, that he creates the sensation in my heart that I am the only person in creation and he has eyes only for me. And just think: he is able to do that for billions of people all at the same time.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

* See piece 177 on page 85.

1154 **Having an off day**

‘Look at it this way,’ encouraged my cerebral companion, ‘it’s a beautiful, bright new morning, the air is crystal clear and the sun is shining on the morning dew, the lambs gambol in the meadows and the bird is on the wing. Take heart, therefore, and have a nice day.’

‘Shove the optimistic drivel, Fred,’ I carped. ‘It’s all very well for you to talk about beautiful new mornings and all that sort of confounded nonsense, but you don’t have to carry the weight of the universe on your weary shoulders like I do.’

(From ‘An Inside Job’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1155 **Pain and growth**

Must it always be that I can see the value of being in the desert only when I get to an oasis?

Even the greatest of life's philosophies is a poor panacea for pain when I'm in it. When I have sufficient hindsight on my life to see that the pain always produced fruit, only then may I increasingly be able to see the purpose of pain while I am in it. That said, I still don't like the desert. Only cactuses and camels do!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1156 **There is a better way ...**

When I, wanton, plough my furrow,
I dig awry and bore and burrow
A hopeless hole inside my head.
It's time I trusted you instead.

(From 'Decisions', poem in *Yearning For The Horizon*)

1157 **Time for change**

Five decades have passed (during which, incidentally, I acquired a venerable career in the groves of Academia), and I confidently anticipate a nomination for the Nobel prize for predictability and common sense. Humility prevents me from mentioning that, in addition, I have become literally bowed down with wisdom. Of course, there are many who admire these qualities, but the truth of the matter is that I'm pissed off being predictable, sensible, wise, and conservative ...

(From 'Kicking Over The Traces', story in *In My Write Mind*)

1158 **Cryptic**

Do love poems need any introduction? Normally, I think not; a love poem is a love poem. Yet, just this once must I deviate from my custom of being up front in matters poetic and don the cloak of mystique: many of the poems in this little volume are not what they seem. Cryptic!

(From the Introduction to *The Dance Of Forever*)

1159 **Are we capable of unconditional love?**

An interesting ... question is this: are human beings capable of unconditional love? Yes, definitely. For instance, most parents will love their children unconditionally most of the time. A more simple example: I am walking along a beach early one morning and find some broken glass in the sand. I pick it up and put it in the bin because I am aware that the beach will be busy later and people might cut themselves. I will not be there, so do not even know whom I have saved from injury. This is simple, unconditional love – in this case for my fellow humans.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1160 **A lecturer learns**

When I first started teaching, I possessed the perfectionist philosophy that everybody in the room had to get something out of most of what I was saying. By the time I finished my career I was able to say to myself: 'If *one* person gets something out of *one* thing I say in the hour, then the lecture was worthwhile.' I think I grew up in those years.

(From a letter, November 2007)

1161 **The root cause of conflict**

One particular creed has, I believe, caused virtually all human conflict since time began, and it is this: 'I'm right and you're wrong.'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1162 **Busy agenda**

'Fred, I am getting more and more frustrated as the days go by. I just can't make any significant impression on my to-do list. For every item I tick off at the top, three new ones attach themselves to the bottom, and each more important than the other. How in heaven's name did I ever find time to pursue a full-time occupation?'

(From 'Retirement My Arse!', story in *Life With Fred*)

1163 **‘Ordinary’ miracles**

For many years I thought the miraculous only manifested in extraordinary circumstances, such as medically unexplainable healings and the like. In recent years, I have come to see the miraculous in ordinary things: new buds appearing in spring, two swans in flight low over the river, standing on a mountaintop in Connemara, the strains of haunting music, the hug of a loved one, the support of a true friend, the smile of a little child, and especially in what I used to think of – but no longer do – as ‘coincidences’.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1164 **Who needs birthdays**

‘My dearest Muse, if you don’t mind my mentioning it, you are not your usual bright and breezy self. Eloquence and verbosity are definitely not your thing today. Surely you are not going to tell me that you don’t like birthdays?’

‘It’s like this,’ responded Lucille languidly, ‘when you’ve had nearly three thousand of them, they become a bit tiresome.’

(From ‘Birthdays’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1165 **The limits of intellect**

I was given a finite, human intellect to deal with finite, human issues. When I overstep its boundaries and try to force it to give me an understanding of the infinite, I remind myself of the amoeba who decided to study for a doctorate in microbiology in order to understand its origins and its destiny.

(From Part 1 of *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*, 3rd edn)

1166 **A different way of seeing**

‘... there are incredible riches to be found in the seeming emptiness that is all around us. But you must look with the eyes of the heart.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

1167 **Growing up**

A part of every full-grown man
Will always be a boy
Who trusts the world, as does a child,
To bring him nought but joy;
But he must live – there is no choice –
The life the real world deems
Best fitted to an adult man,
And shed his childish dreams.

(From ‘The Man-child’, poem in *Oh, My Head!*)

1168 **Redefining happiness**

I used to think that happiness meant being free of worry, and being serene, peaceful. Indeed, I still believe that many people experience happiness in this mode or variants of it. However, because my experience has been a life of multiple, stupendous miracles but decidedly elusive peace of mind and serenity, I have found it necessary to redefine happiness and, having done so, I discovered that I have found – or rather, been given – a much more profound and lasting happiness. The words may be inadequate but, for me, happiness is *knowing*, in a way that utterly defies limited, human proof, that, regardless of appearances, regardless of what is going on inside me or outside of me, fundamentally all is well, here and hereafter.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1169 **Elusive peace**

In respite from the daily round,
I slip into my study,
My temporary hermitage,
To spend a time of quiet
With the Love of all my life;
But domestic peace and stillness
Are such seldom found phenomena,
For ours is a noisy household ...

(From ‘Never a Dull Moment’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

1170 **I'm a bit slow first thing in the morning**

'Fred,' I said immediately on awakening, 'I have just had this bizarre dream. Perhaps you did too?'

'No, not me; I was off exploring the unused portions of your brain. Vast territory, you know.'

'So they say. Did you find anything interesting?'

'No. Actually it was deadly boring.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because it's unused, dimwit! God, but you're slow this morning!'

I suppose I should have seen it coming, but I had not yet had my first cup of coffee. If something is unused, particularly the brain, it is unlikely to be fraught with interest is it? Just dull, grey matter, that's all. But Fred often likes to have a go at me; it gives him a bit of exercise, so I suppose I at least afforded him an opportunity for his daily workout.

(From 'Matrix For A Mandolin', story in *Life With Fred*)

1171 **Unconditional love**

Also, contrary to the usual orientation that it is we who should honour God, my experience has been (and often beyond my wildest imaginings) that it is God who honours us *where we are*. St Francis of Assisi said, *God's admiration for us is infinitely greater than anything we can conjure up for him*. Now, that's unconditional love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1172 **Life is ...**

I was browsing through my bookshelves last night when my eye fell on a tome that I haven't had occasion to pick up for some time. I don't know how I could have forgotten it, but the first three words in the book enunciate one of the greatest truisms ever written or spoken and also represent the understatement of this or any other century: *Life is difficult*.*

(From 'Life Is Difficult', story in *Life With Lucille*)

* M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (1978).

1173 **Tears**

Tears are one of God's wonderful gifts. When I am in distress, tears give a release that nothing else can accomplish. It is no accident that he made them like water; they flow out taking with them some or all of the hurt, cleansing me in the process. If there is residue of hurt to be dealt with, it is a lot easier to tackle when the tears have done their work.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1174 **The person in the mirror**

A quirk I've discerned in practitioners,
Whose mission is things of the mind,
Is a frequent, peculiar blindness
Where insight I ventured to find;
Namely, having deduced their conclusions,
(I merely observe, not condemn),
They inform me what's wrong with yours truly,
But it's usually what's wrong with them.

(‘Poor Reflection’, poem in *Oh, My Head!*)

1175 **Dealing with troublesome issues**

I have a strong sense that to continue to examine – or ‘sit with’, to use a popular expression – troublesome issues, particularly ones from the past, beyond their sell-by date only prolongs the pain they cause and may even give them lives of their own, divorced from the original circumstances, and they then stubbornly resist all attempts to remove them. My book *Oh, My Head!* (a collection of poems, stories and essays) bears the following inscription on the title sheet:

‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’

Socrates (5th century BC)

‘The over-examined life is not worth living either!’

Ken O’Sullivan (21st century AD)

Enough said!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1176 **Catching the writing bug?**

I mentioned a famous and much-loved Irish writer named John B. Keane who died in 2002. He comes from a very small area in north Kerry which has produced more writers per square mile than probably any other part of Ireland or even countries further afield. Now, here's an interesting thing: both my parents came from that little enclave and, although I was born and raised in England, my home was in the area for eighteen years from the ages of 13 to 31. I didn't start writing seriously until I was 47, but I wonder if I caught the bug there!

(From a letter, June 2005)

1177 **Mutiny inside**

Oh no, not again!
This is all too much;
Give me a break for goodness' sake!
I've got another mutiny on my hands this morning,
As if I hadn't enough to cope with already ...
My emotions are on the rampage,
The little bastards!

(From 'You Never Know', poem in *Overdoing It!*)

1178 **What about my dreams?**

'Lucille, my treasure, I wish to consult your boundless store of knowledge and wisdom, if I may. As you more than anybody – with the possible exception of Fred – already know, I am complex enough without attempting to analyse dreams, so interpreting my internal nocturnal excursions is something I usually avoid like the plague. However, there is always the exception. I am extremely curious about a number of dreams I have had in recent times ... Given that dreams are manufactured in the subconscious, where you do your best work for me, and in the light of your vast experience, I was wondering, dearest Muse, if you could throw any illumination on the subject?'

(From 'Red Herring', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1179 **If only ...**

‘There I was, savouring my coffee and chocolate chip muffin, all – not through choice – on my own, when three beautiful women asked if they might share my table ... I assented – naturally – but then, for some inexplicable reason, I proceeded to sit there, motionless and mute, somewhat reminiscent of Lot’s wife who, if you recall, Fred, was turned into a pillar of salt – or was it granite? No, salt. I mean, I was totally tonguetied, as if suddenly stricken with paralysis of the vocal cords. They prattled delightfully on, as females do, but I said precisely nothing, sat there like a stuffed walrus. *Sigh!* Another golden opportunity missed; a thousand curses on my reticence.’

(From ‘Proper Order’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1180 **Perfect love**

One of the damaging notions I absorbed from the teachings of the tradition in which I was raised, is that pretty much everything about my make-up is inadequate. This crossed my mind this morning ... when I was thinking of God’s infinite, steadfast, unconditional love for me. When I turned to ponder my love for him, the words ‘faltering’ and ‘inadequate’ came immediately to mind. But the truth is that, *in God’s eyes*, my love for him is perfect. When I assume that God sees me as inadequate in any way, I limit him.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1181 **Curiosity killed the cat, dear reader**

‘I have a relevant question though. People who read or listen to this story are going to want to know what kind of work we will be doing together,’ I said.

‘Well, the poor little dears are going to have to wait, aren’t they? If we tell them now, they might not bother to read any future stories about our partnership – our friendship. And we do want plenty of readers, don’t we?’

(From ‘Patience Is A Virtue’, story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

1182 **God doesn't make junk**

If, as John Calvin asserted, we are inherently evil and are saved only by God's mercy/grace, that is tantamount to saying that God makes junk and then spends his time trying to instil some worth into it. I believe the opposite to be true. God makes perfect 'products', then spends his time protecting us from harm or healing us when we are harmed, even when that harm comes about as a result of our own poor choices. *That's what grace is.* Where I fall off my perch is when I expect God to do this protecting and healing according to my mode and time frame. His mode and time frame are always perfect but, unfortunately, I don't always see it that way.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1183 **Candles**

I really appreciate the symbolism of a candle. Every time I sit down at the kitchen table, even for a quick cup of tea, or in the lounge to read, and often when working in my study as well, I light a candle. My wife calls me 'The Candle Man' – among other things (all of which are complimentary I hasten to add!). I am going to light a second one at breakfast tomorrow morning and it will be just for you.

(From a letter, October 2003)

1184 **Lucille gets me back on track**

'You're never going to write anything if you just sit there, gazing out of the window like that. You've been staring vacantly into the blue beyond for the last twenty minutes, and not a word to show for it.'

'But I'm looking for some worthwhile ideas, Lucille.'

'Oh boy! You have got rusty, haven't you? Looks like you've forgotten your golden rule.'

'Golden rule?'

'Yes. Put pen to paper and write the first thing that comes into your mind ...'

(From 'Giving Satisfaction', story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1185 **How shall I say it?**

‘I said that there are well over six hundred thousand words in the English language. If anybody had asked me to guess, I would have said about thirty thousand at the most. But here’s the bit that bothers me: despite access to all this verbiage, of late I am coming across situations much more frequently when mere words are totally inadequate to express what is in the mind, the heart or the spirit.’

(From ‘Lost For Words’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1186 **No matter what happens in this life ...**

Spirit, on the other hand, is what I call the ‘indestructible essence’ at the core of my being. It is that part of me that is eternal, that comes from God, that ultimately becomes one with God, and is the wondrous, inexhaustible source of what animates me here and hereafter. It existed before my assemblage of cells came into being and it will be there after it has stopped functioning. Consoling thought indeed.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1187 **Why I go so often to Connemara**

I’m here to nurture my soul,
I’m here to keep my heart whole,
For this is a sacred landscape,
This is a place of tranquillity,
And this is where I belong.

(From ‘Belonging’, poem in *Máméan – A Sacred Place*)

1188 **Valuing myself**

My aspiration is not to value myself by my possessions, my performance or my achievements, rather to see these things as largely incidental to my life and not the centre of my self-worth. My contentment is to be found in being an ordinary human being, unconditionally loved and valued by One far greater than me.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1189 **Mixed motives?**

My praiseworthy and selfless motivation in undertaking this epic voyage, at enormous personal expense, instead of staying in the homeland, where the Creator had provided us with an ample supply of sea and beaches and sundry other holiday distractions, was to immerse the fledglings in the genuine French atmosphere – let them soak up a *souçon* of *la vie française*, if you get my drift. The opportunity which the safari afforded to consume considerable quantities of the best Bordeaux at a fraction of the price I pay at home had not even figured in the altruistic consideration of my family's needs.

(From 'French Leave', essay in *In My Write Mind*)

1190 **Admiring the true worth of a friend**

I'm sure you don't really want me to administer compliments, but I am going to anyway. The way in which you can constantly draw the higher lessons from what's happening in your life (even if kicking and struggling sometimes, as you mentioned!) just amazes me. In truth, I'm just a little envious – in a nice kind of way!

(From a letter, July 1998)

1191 **A lost sister or brother?**

We have yearned for each other
From the cradle of eternity,
Longed for each other
Through the mists of time and space,
Dreamed of each other
In a mystical embrace,
But were lost to each other
For no outcome could there be.
The world said that you had no life
No being would it see,
Save one within the womb
And that was all too brief...

(From 'From The Cradle Of Eternity', poem in
From The Cradle Of Eternity)

1192 **I don't know what's best for me**

My life is full of yearnings,
But I know the best procedure
Is to stem the strong temptation
To spell them out in detail,
And resist to be specific
On these longings of the heart,
Since you know just what I yearn for
Beyond what I desire
In my insular perceptions;
And I feel, from long experience,
That when I am prescriptive
And tell you what I want,
When I haven't got a clue,
I only limit you
And the wonders that you work
In me.

(From 'Letting Go, Letting God', poem in
From The Cradle Of Eternity)

1193 **Controversial perhaps**

During my time here, I have rejected most of the articles and books I have appraised for potential student use, because they are frequently written primarily with the authors' academic colleagues in mind rather than the student. The reason is quite simple: students don't review books.

(From a report, March 1999)

1194 **Not accepting the unacceptable**

Of course, it is always sane and reasonable for me to accept *what is now*, i.e. no matter what is happening to recognise that that's the way it is in the present moment. This does not mean, however, that I lie down under the unacceptable if, in the next moment, I can make a decision to make changes to prevent the unacceptable happening again.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1195 **Too trusting?**

For much of my life, I was too trusting, but I have learned through painful experience that some people are not trustworthy – sometimes even the most well-meaning. So I have learned to be cautious before reposing my trust in anybody, to test the water first so to speak. This is a lesson that has taken me an astonishingly long time to learn and it is not perfect; there are still times when I am hurt or let down, but far better to be spontaneously open on occasion than hide my light under a bushel or shut myself off inside a self-protective cocoon.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1196 **Up optimism!**

‘He who expects nothing shall never be disappointed,’ sighed Fred, betraying a pessimistic worldview.

‘Cut it out, Fred,’ I chided. ‘That’s a sad, worn-out, old cliché and it’s just not true. The universe is an extravagant giver, a place of much and plenty. Consider, my long-time crony, the opposing and much more realistic saying: “Those who do not ask do not receive.” You must always expect the best, the most, the optimum; then life will shower great abundance upon you. I hope, Fred, my dear old friend, that you will take these positive thoughts to heart.’

(From ‘Great Expectations’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1197 **God never gives up**

I am overawed and humbled and feel loved beyond my comprehension that My God has never given up on me ... He has come to me time and time and time again with this message, and when I would not absorb it gently, he had to endure the pain of watching me suffer, so that I would learn, in order that he could protect me. Even the most compassionate human lover’s patience is limited, but My God never, ever gives up on me.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1198 **Confusing isn't it?**

'The older I get, Fred, and the more knowledge I acquire, the more I realise I don't know. This perplexing paradox, I have discovered, has much if not all to do with the apparent reality that for every opinion there's a counter opinion, every argument a counterargument, every philosophy a counter philosophy, every unshakeable belief a counter belief of equal unshakeability and, increasingly, it seems, for every piece of research, counter research.'

(From 'More Information, Less Knowledge', story in *Life With Fred*)

1199 **Understanding and knowledge**

'In worldly affairs, there is no understanding without first acquiring knowledge. It is not always thus in the eternal realm. You can verify what I am about to say for yourself: you have an inner understanding of the eternal – in itself an inadequate and misunderstood word – which bypasses all knowledge; and since it is purely intuitive, it also bypasses all language. So I cannot explain it further than to say that it is an understanding beyond understanding – a state that even the greatest intellects can *never* even begin to approach. Indeed, the intellect can positively hinder the attainment of this mystical comprehension – this enlightenment if you prefer, although that is another word that is often seriously misunderstood.'

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

1200 **Old age – what's that?**

I often think of my father. At 77 he was preparing to start a new business – not some tame pursuit as befits 'old age' like dealing in rare postage stamps, rather a large caravan park in a holiday resort! He had much of the work done on the site and was all set to go. Unfortunately, he died the following year and his plans never came to fruition. For me, however, the valuable lesson is that chronological age is irrelevant, and I refuse to be pigeonholed according to my era.

(From a letter, May 2004)

1201 **Oneness with God?**

To many, the notion of oneness with God seems strange, even impossible, or pure fantasy. However, it is found in the teachings of many religious traditions. For example, the ancient Hindu tradition or Indian tradition is that the goal of human existence is to experience one's oneness with God. In Christianity, in the Gospel of John, Jesus prays to his father for his disciples: 'so that they may be one just as you and I are one'. [John 17:11]

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1202 **A question that's always worth considering**

It's human to take things for granted,
But how granted do we take things for?

(From 'Making Amends', poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

1203 **The answers are within**

I now rarely listen to finite, human explanations of the spiritual no matter how erudite, logical or persuasive they may be, for they can never satisfy me. I have all the explanations I need, moment to moment, deep within me, in that indestructible essence which is mine alone to access. Besides, when compared with the authentic inner experience of God, even the most learned and illuminated of such external explanations and interpretations are only marginally better than baby talk.

The only time I ever consider listening to anybody is when it is clear to my spirit that they have found the truth deep within themselves and are merely expressing how it is for them, not trying to shove it down my throat. And I give a very wide berth to those who, with great erudition, logic and persuasiveness, will try to prove that there is no God. Compared with the wondrous and profound inner reality, even the most erudite and articulate of these essays appear like a dyslexic child's first reader.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1204 **A man's feminine side**

A little while ago, you paid me a beautiful compliment, namely that I am a man who is in touch with the feminine side of his nature. I thankfully acknowledge that to be true, but I regard it as a gift and can take no credit for it.

(From a letter, October 2004)

1205 **Wisdom**

When I was young and in my prime,
I thought I knew it all,
The information I required
In life to have a ball.
But now I'm old and know much more,
I find I feel the gall
Of knowing what I really know,
To wit, I know fuck all.

(Poem 'Wisdom?', poem in *Overdoing It!*)

1206 **Sacredness of place**

A number of my poems, for example 'The River Nymph' and 'How Lovely On The Mountain', express how I experience the reality – the person – of God in the awesome beauty of Nature. In this respect, some places are more sacred to me than others, notably Connemara in general and Máméan in particular.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1207 **Why I'm so sensitive**

Why do I feel with such intensity
As if 'twere deprivation?
I've twigged, although it makes no sense to me –
And scarce a consolation –
That others have a shield-like density,
But I've no insulation.

(From 'Sensation', poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1208 **Relying on Lucille**

‘Have I ever chanced to mention the “milk and vinegar effect” my dearest Muse?’

I had spoken with a careless nonchalance, but Lucille, on whom – with an astonishing rapidity – I have come to rely for far more than literary inspiration, intuitively picked up the vibe that something was amiss, for there was an undisguised tone of concern in her response.

‘No, indeed you haven’t, precious lambkin, but it doesn’t sound like the sort of thing you’d administer to an infant as a mild restorative after a bout of colic.’ She paused, pensive. ‘All is not well I perceive, you poor thing. You’d better tell your Lucille all about it.’

(From ‘Leave It To Lucille ...’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1209 **Synchronicity**

Louis Pasteur said, ‘Did you ever observe to whom accidents [coincidences] happen? Chance favours only the prepared mind.’

That’s all very fine as far as it goes but, with respect for Pasteur, it doesn’t go nearly far enough. Based on my observations and experience, the real synchronicity mostly comes – or is most evident – to those with a prepared spirit. And how did I prepare my spirit? I didn’t. God did. All I provided was the yearning to become one with him, and even that came from God, for I have nothing I was not given.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1210 **One view of recovery**

The first line on the following page really struck a chord with me: ‘The purpose of healing is recovery ... not recovery *from*, but recovery *of*.’ I feel this very strongly. I have always had what I needed but a huge amount of it got mislaid en route; my purpose is to recover it. And I am recovering it, slowly but surely.

(From a letter, July 2003)

1211 **Seamlessness of yearnings**

In an ideal world, spiritual yearnings and human yearnings are seamless not separate. Harmony is the goal, allowing the spiritual to lead and direct the human, realising the human desires that are wholesome and filtering out those that are not. I do not live in an ideal world, however, so I try to come as close as I can to this harmony.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1212 **Thirst for knowledge**

‘Squid,’ he repeated, ‘stuffed; it’s here on the menu. Most unusual, don’t you think?’

‘If you say so, Fred. Now if you don’t mind ...’

‘... C’mere,’ he went on, ‘you’re the former caterer of the duo; how do you stuff a squid?’

... ‘Simple, Fred, old man, simple. You take the squid – preferably dead – in one hand, the assemblage of breadcrumbs, garlic, parsley and so forth in the other, and you shove it up the squid’s arse!’

(From ‘Stuff It’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1213 **All you can do is pray**

A sign of the way in which we use language but much more, I believe, an indication of the attitude we have to prayer is what is often said to somebody in times of trouble when all human means of help have failed: ‘All you can do is pray.’ Now the denotation of this expression is very positive. ‘All’ is an inclusive word which means that the prayer will cover everything. The connotation, which comes about through linguistic usage is something like this: ‘Well, all the effective remedies have failed, so there isn’t much left but prayer.’

The truth of the matter is that the *best* thing we can do is pray. Human means of help are, of course, employed because they are gifts from God, but they are much more effective when guided by the power of prayer.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1214 **God keeps his promises**

For when God says
It will be so,
It *will* be so.
Take heart!

(From 'Take Heart', poem in *Oh, My Head!*)

1215 **Living dangerously**

The initial furore over what I call 'The Lunatic Roundabout' has died down, but I believe its design and execution to be still seriously and dangerously flawed. What I am about to say may sound like a joke but I assure you it is not: I offer a prayer of petition each time I am about to enter this abomination, and a prayer of thanksgiving when I get safely off it. Over the last forty years, I have driven extensively in Ireland, the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Italy and the United States, and I have never come across anything even remotely resembling it. I think it must have been designed by a panel-beater.

(From a letter, October 1999)

1216 **Beauty versus glamour**

True beauty is an enduring, integral characteristic of a person place or thing. Glamour is a transient, media-generated, commerce-driven veneer. Beauty nurtures and enlivens. Glamour is artificial and creates false (often unhealthy) values.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1217 **It's all in the pronunciation**

'Pardon the personal question, Lucille, but have you ever had to diet?'

'No; my hair has been naturally black ever since I was a little girl.'

I laughed: 'No, no, old thing. It must be my pronunciation. I mean have you ever had to di-et, not dye it?'

(From 'Friends In Need', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1218 **The other side of Fred**

I know, I can be tiresome and hurtful, but that's not the real me – honestly. It's just a mask I wear for the world and, most times, for you too. I mean, I am, at heart, just one of those kids that grown-ups label “a lovable rogue” but, behind it all, he sniffed pathetically, ‘I'm still just a vulnerable little boy.’

(From ‘A Sheep In Wolf's Clothing’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1219 **Antidote to arrogance**

It is good for me to remember this at all times: I have *nothing* that I wasn't given. When I am praised for my gifts and talents, I do well to recall who it was that gave them to me, immediately give thanks and ask for what purpose they are intended. This keeps the focus off me and on the giver.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1220 **Longing for a masterpiece**

See, it's like this, dear reader: I would really like to pen a brilliant opening paragraph. You know, the sort that has you hooked from line one, agog to know how the piece is going to proceed and what the denouement will be. In short, the sort of opening that every writer longs to create. But the truth of the matter is that I can't think of a blasted thing to say – beyond what I've just said, of course, if that isn't insulting your intelligence.

(From ‘The Imperfect Story’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1221 **Mission**

I very much enjoyed our brief chat on Sunday. I found the quotation which I mentioned ... It runs as follows: *I pray that I may have the courage to help bring about what the weary world needs but does not know how to get.*

This touched me deeply when I first heard it; it most nearly describes the desire of my own heart. I wish you many blessings on your own path toward achieving the same end.

(From a letter, May 2001)

1222 **Never alone**

When I weep, you weep with me
In kindness and compassion,
And we kiss each other's tears;
When I laugh, you laugh with me,
In freedom and festivity
To wear life's garment lightly ...

(From 'The Mystical Touch', poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

1223 **Annoyance on a train journey**

I took out my notebook and very quickly became absorbed in the task at hand ... I paused only to order a coffee and a sandwich from the passing refreshment trolley, and to ask Lucille to cast an eye over my efforts. The one fly in the ointment was a woman sitting opposite us who was accompanied by what looked like a juvenile clean-shaven baboon sucking a lollipop, but who I presume was her son. Well, the woman was okay; she just read a book and minded her own business, but the baboon, a cheeky young twerp, stuck out his tongue at me every time I looked up from my labours.

(From 'Noticed Anything?', Part 2', story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1224 **The body – in one sense – never dies**

The body is said to have 'cellular memory' – i.e. the components of the body hold on to memories, in much the same way as the mind does, particularly emotions from the past. I believe then that there is pretty solid reason to conjecture that the spirit has 'corporeal memory' – that is, it will store, for all eternity, not so much the memory of the physical characteristics of my body, but more the memory of the ways in which my body contributed to who I am.

If one takes this a bit further, one can view the teaching of some religions about the resurrection of the body in a completely different light.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1225 **God seems arbitrary, but ...**

The truth, at last, I comprehend,
That your ways are not mine;
You love us all with like intent,
But not the same design.

(From 'Uniqueness', poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

1226 **How love works**

In thinking about the astonishing love that God showers on me in each moment – even when I feel abandoned in the darkness – the following thought came: surely God doesn't give me all this love to remain bottled up inside me; surely it is meant for reaching out to others. But immediately thereafter, came the opposite thought: if God is giving me all this love *so that* I will reach out with it to others, then his love is conditional. That, of course, is impossible. Maybe, then, God is inundating me with all this incredible love simply and purely because he loves me. All I have to do is receive it. Mind-boggling! ...

If, purely as a spontaneous, heartfelt response to the experience of this divine love, I want to reach out to others with it, that is my freely chosen response to his love. What God then does is to honour my response from deep within, displaying yet further love for me. That's how love works.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1227 **How to deal with gremlins**

I am so glad you are feeling a little better physically, but boy do I understand what it is like when those other internal gremlins you mentioned start to misbehave themselves. When all else fails, I have to talk to them in the only language they understand – I won't assail your ladylike ear with the assortment of four-letter expletives which I use, but they are marvellous for forcing an existential crisis to beat a hasty retreat!

(From a letter, March 2007)

1228 **Why not more Divine?**

I notice that I do not overuse the word ‘divine’ in my writings. Why? Because when I describe God as divine and me as human, it perpetuates the notion of separateness, of the gulf that exists between him and me. But there is no separateness, no gulf ...

God is, of course, infinitely ‘higher’ than me but that is seen only from a finite, human perspective. At the level of the indestructible essence of my spirit, there is no separateness, only union. Yet, within that union, each person is unique, just as each branch on the vine is unique. Indeed, as I have already realised in so many stupendous ways, the more I experience my oneness with God, the more I become uniquely me. What’s even more wondrous is that the more I experience my oneness with God, the more I realise how stunningly beautiful my uniqueness is. And that is where my incredibly strong self-esteem comes from – and that is pure gift from God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1229 **Rationale for atheism?**

I believe that it is impossible to be one hundred per cent objective in this existence. But, in so far as I can stand back and view matters in as detached a way as possible, I am increasingly drawn to the conclusion that, given the available evidence, there is no longer a sustainable rationale for atheism. A good deal of the logic that I have seen seems to be based as much on denial as on deliberation ...

Interesting on the intellectual level, is it not? But here’s the salient point: when one comes into an intimate, profoundly personal knowledge of the Divine, all the arguments for and against atheism – the tidal wave of rhetoric, the logic and counter logic, the subtle, sometimes seductive manipulation of facts and concepts, the trenchant invective ... proffered by ... anybody on either side of the debate, become utterly irrelevant.

(From ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’,
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

1230 **Fantasy? Perhaps!**

I nodded (words seemed inappropriate), scarcely able to believe the good fortune that the universe was literally showering upon me. My eyes opened wide in expectation. Slowly, she removed her diaphanous garment, revealing a beauty beyond compare, and moved toward where I now lay in the bed. ‘Move over,’ she whispered intimately, ‘and I will climb in beside you.’ I did not need to be told twice; if the universe was determined to bestow favours upon me in such great abundance, who was I to keep it waiting?

(From ‘A Cautionary Tale’, story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1231 **His stuff and my stuff**

Anger, guilt, blame, fear, despair, grief and so forth are outgrowths of my stuff. His stuff is ‘limited’ to pure love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1232 **Another view of success**

The absence of success is not a failure in the widely understood meaning of the word. When I have tried really hard and ‘failed’ I can count that as one of the greatest ‘successes’ of all. To put it another way, I give myself wholesome credit for honest toil and dedicated effort, regardless of the presence or absence of a ‘successful’ outcome ...

(From ‘Success And Failure’, essay in *Reality And Illusion & Other Essays*)

1233 **Dubious fame**

Paddy the Welder never lived it down, strangely never wanted to, for it brought him fame if not fortune: building the stand at the long-awaited greyhound track, he welded a diagonal to the staunch upright through the rigid rungs of the ladder, and then had to get the boss – my father – to get hold of an angle grinder cutter to slice through the same diagonal in order to take down the ladder!

(From ‘Paddy The Welder’, story in *In My Write Mind*)

1234 **No self-propulsion**

The truth is the awareness
That, in You, I am just everything,
The precious and the very thing
I was always meant to be.

(From 'Now Isn't That Something!', poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

1235 **Dealing with denial**

'I have always had considerable respect for that saying *When the pupil is ready the teacher will appear*. It embodies, it seems to me, a universal truth about denial, namely that there is little point in tackling an issue until a) one is aware of it, and b) one is ready to deal with it ...'

(From 'When The Pupil Is Ready ...', story in *Life With Fred*)

1236 **Computerised companion**

Who, I hear you ask, is Svetlana? She is a computer-generated voice on my machine who, at my bidding, will read out any text I highlight. Svetlana is my name for her, not because she is Russian, but because I consider it a suitable acronym: Sexy Voice Electronically Transmitted Lacks All Nubile Appeal!

(From a letter, October 2005)

1237 **Judge not**

When I spontaneously judge people – based on their appearance or actions in a given moment or over time – I cut myself off from the possibility of being of service to them and greatly reduce my receptiveness to what they might have to offer to me.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1238 **Beware**

Alcohol dulls the ache
But sharpens the pain.

(From 'Job's Comforter', poem in *No Rest For The Wicked*)

1239 **Pride**

Pride is too expensive a commodity; nobody can afford it. Unfortunately, most people don't seem to know that, and the cost to individuals and to the world as a whole is incalculable.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1240 **Another view of death**

For those who see beyond the horizon
There is no such thing as tragic death,
Only tragic consequences
For those left behind ...

(Adapted from 'Tragic Death?', poem in *No Rest For The Wicked*)

1241 **Unhelpful advice re: fear**

Telling me that 'Fear is the absence of faith' is about as helpful as taking laxatives for an ingrowing toenail. The fear only gets worse, because I feel that I can never believe strongly enough to transcend it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1242 **The importance of gratitude**

Indeed, second only to having a higher power in my life, working on having a sense of gratitude (and it does take work) is the single most helpful thing I have done, and it's a continuing process.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

1243 **His ways versus our ways**

Am I being naïve or is the answer staring me in the face? We are told that God's ways are not our ways, and that's pretty plain to see in daily life. But since we are made in his image and likeness, surely some of our ways – particularly when we are attuned to him – must be like his. But which ones? Loving ways, I suppose.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1244 **When to ‘hand over’?**

Am I ‘handing over’ to God aspects of my life that he has already empowered me to deal with? If so, is this why I appear to be stuck in the same place for so long? Could it be that sending stuff back to the powerhouse instead of using the energy already emitted is not the best option?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1245 **Nothing doing**

‘It’s no good, Lucille. I’ve been sitting here prodding the brain cells for an hour, two, possibly more, and not a single line, not one solitary word; and how my heart yearns to pour out, in poignant verse, the sensations of the joy and anguish of love, which are surging up inside me like a wellspring about to break the surface. Well, that may be a bit over the top, but you get the general drift. I had rather hoped, my esteemed Muse, that you might at least initiate the process with a line or two.’

Lucille said nothing.

(From ‘Silence Is Golden’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1246 **Letting go of the past**

I need to become aware of any false, unhelpful or damaging messages from the past – family, teachers, friends, pastors or others, and then become willing to let them go without condemning the source of them. Condemning others is destructive for me; if I see myself as a victim, I will almost certainly not get well. Indeed, victims are among the unhappiest people on the planet.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

1247 **Freudian slip**

Sir Walter Scott had twigged, you see,
The quirks of man’s hypocrisy:
‘O, What a tangled web we weave
When first we practise to conceive!’

(From ‘Freudian Slip’, poem in *Hang On!*)

1248 **An important question**

So, do we want higher values for our children? If our answer is 'No', but they eventually do happen to come upon a spiritual way of being in later life, and discover how precious it becomes to them, they may be forgiven for asking, 'Why didn't our parents tell us about this?'

(From 'Higher Values For Our Children?',
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

1249 **The healing hug**

You see,
The truth of the matter is,
And not to beat further around the bush:
I badly need a hug.

(From 'Heal Me', poem in *Hang On!*)

1250 **But do we ever learn from history?**

Examine history. Time and again, it has been more than amply displayed that highly developed intellects, skilled in rhetoric and adept at manipulating facts and ideas, can appear to prove or justify virtually anything. The outcomes of such efforts, which are heightened where the audience is impressionable, are often bizarre and sometimes tragic, not least in the province of organised religion ...

(From 'Memo From A former Atheist Mk I', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn; also in the Appendix to this book)

1251 **Intellect?**

A dear friend from Texas, who died a few years ago, was a very spiritual woman, but also very down to earth and practical. She shared with me many years ago something that I have since learned from personal experience (thank God): *Intellectualising spiritual things is the worst kind of bondage*. I won't go into detail here, but my essay 'Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II' takes this theme further.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1252 **The forklift treatment**

Some years ago I was writing about the result of handing one's life over to God. I said, light-heartedly, 'Okay God, I've handed my life over to you absolutely. Now, when are you going to send up the forklift to get me out of bed?'

Amusing but absurd. He has already given me the simple gifts I need to get on with my daily life: the physical strength to get out of bed and start my day, the brainpower to decide what is the next right thing to do, and the common sense to turn to him and ask when I haven't a clue. But I am a frail human and this is not a perfect process. There are still days when my batteries are completely flat and I need the forklift treatment to get me up and running. Today is one of them. And that's okay too; God has the best forklifts in the business, and he has a huge supply. He needs them: on any given day, there are millions of flat batteries all over the world.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1253 **Reflection on a meddling subconscious**

I ne'er could live in a haunted house;
'Twould fill my heart with dread.
Imagine my consternation then,
When I found I'd a haunted head!

(‘Too Close For Comfort’, poem in *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*)

1254 **If Nature could talk**

It was really good to hear how much you find Nature a solace as well as an inspiration. Sometimes, the simplest thing can lift my heart. I went for a walk down by the river near where I live today, and came across what is fundamentally a weed which should be withered at this time of year, but there were two flowers on it in full bloom. I looked at this simple sight in wonder, and the thought came to me that if it would talk, it might say, ‘I am blossoming unusually late this year just so that I could lift your heart today.’

(From a letter, December 2004)

1255 **The devil you know ...**

A sense of timing, you know, was never what Declan was noted for; quite the reverse in fact. Don't get me wrong now; he was there to prepare delightful delicacies for the paying guests more or less often enough to justify his existence. In other words, he was a pretty good chef. But he always selected the morning of a prestigious wedding breakfast to suffer an attack of migraine, or the occasion on which I was attempting to impress a bevy of VIP travel agents with the excellence of our cuisine to acquire a septic thumb, or the August bank holiday weekend to get acute and prolonged diarrhoea which kept him ensconced in the loo rather than propped at the hot-plate ... So, as you can imagine, my tolerance of his health-related vacillations, wore thin with the passage of years; but I grinned and bore it, for he was a pretty good chef and pretty good chefs were hard to come by.

(From 'Haute Cuisine', story in *In My Write Mind*)

1256 **Less is more**

Under stress?
Just want peace?
Need some prime time alone?
Then cut the umbilical cord to your phone!

(“Too Much Technology?”, poem in *Overdoing It!*)

1257 **On lecturing**

‘I, as you know, my precious Muse, always get stage fright before every lecture, and a major attack thereof before I meet a new group for the first time. Extraordinary, after nearly ten thousand lectures, wouldn't you say? You'd imagine I'd have got used to it by now, but no, the knot in the stomach persists – unpleasant overture to one's labours, don't you think? They do say, though, that all the best actors get stage fright before a performance, and I certainly give performances. Occupational hazard, I suppose.’

(From ‘The Non-directive Counsellor’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1258 **Responsibility for decisions**

The way of a secular world – particularly the business world – is to blame the decision (hence the decision-maker) when the outcome is unsatisfactory. In matters of the heart and spirit, this type of thinking is seldom valid. A poor outcome does not necessarily invalidate the original decision since the heart and spirit operate in a realm that has little to do with secular logic.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1259 **When criticism is an inside job**

‘Why and for whom,’ queried Fred, one day when he had nothing better to do, ‘do you write all this “stuff” – if you’ll pardon my calling it “stuff”? Don’t you think your allocation of our brain cells has considerably better things to be doing than churning out the substantial quantities of the naïve and time-wasting drivel with which you occupy yourself all too often?’

(From ‘Pushing His Luck’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1260 **Worthy legacy**

‘I see, Tomas. I have often wondered if all that has been in my life will end with me – apart from the gift of insight which goes on from generation to generation – and I am very glad to learn from you now that part of my journey here is to pass on the indescribable blessings I have received so that they may bless others in the future.’

(From ‘The Dance Goes On’, draft sequel to the novel *Black On Magenta*)

1261 **A seeming paradox**

Here is another seeming paradox: the fact that I have such a positive self-image has helped me to have more of the freedom of humility. The reason is simple: I had nothing to do with acquiring the self-esteem. It was handed to me on a golden platter by My Beautiful One. How can I take credit for that?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1262 **Living in other people's emotions**

When they're up, we're up. When they're down, we're down. So we endeavour to control others, to fix them so that they will behave as is good for them (our version). We become 'people pleasers', i.e. we'll do almost anything to make people like us. We find it almost impossible to say 'No'. We try ever harder and harder to keep everything and everybody – especially ourselves – on an even keel, but only get more and more screwed up emotionally – and often physically too.

(From Part 3 of *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*,
3rd edn)

1263 **Definitely not handsome!**

We arrived just as the judging of the bonny baby competition was in progress. The parents were lined up, infants in arms, and the judge was moving along the line, making comments to each set of parents as he advanced. He was a sombre-looking, wizened little man with half-moon glasses, a marked squint, legs that were too short and arms that were too long; he displayed a mouthful of teeth that looked like rusty nails, and a few wisps of sandy-coloured hair punctuated the shiny, upper extremity. In short, he looked like a bald, skinny, cross-eyed primate that had been rejected by the zoo.

(From 'If The Hat Fits ...?', story in *When The Bug Bites*)

1264 **I like my privacy**

It was one of those occasions on which Fred, the aggravating twit, pushed his luck. You'd think he'd know already, wouldn't you? I mean, he is a permanent resident, has been with me since day one and, therefore, ought to know all, whatever about better. Although I have to admit that the uncomfortable sensation of another entity, however internal and personal, knowing absolutely everything about me has always been a bit, well – not to put a tooth in it – much.

(From 'Pushing His Luck', story in *Life With Fred*)

1265 **Difficult to concentrate when ...**

Last week, I motored a phenomenal distance to deposit my favourite daughter in one of those speculative summer schools, to behold, on arrival, a notice posted at the entrance to the establishment, proclaiming that we were to take leave of our loved ones at the front door; the front door mind you – not even in the front hall.

The implied suggestion that parents might contaminate the interior of the hallowed precincts was insult enough. This, however, paled into insignificance when compared with a dilemma of far greater proportions. We had departed from the ancestral home a little behind the appointed schedule and were, therefore, obliged to proceed non-stop to our destination at as high a rate of knots as the potholed highways would permit, with the result that my kidneys were now screaming for immediate attention.

(From 'Inflation', story in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1266 **Troubles and blessings**

The bottom line is this: if I were asked by somebody to tell them about my troubles and my blessings, I would take about three minutes to tell them my troubles and about five hours to talk about my blessings.

(From a letter, February 2006)

1267 **How to climb out of a pit**

If I am down in a deep pit, there aren't too many ways to get out of it. If the sides are uneven, I might just be able to find sufficient hand and foot holds to clamber out. If I yell loud enough for help, and if there is somebody within earshot, and the respondent is favourably disposed, he might just let down a rope and pull me out. Alternatively, I can write my way out of it. If it is true that the pen is mightier than the sword, then it is surely also true that it is mightier than the influences that pull the mind and spirit down into a metaphorical pit.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1268 **Fat profits**

On the day that my father took over the hotel, Dan, the long-serving major-domo, alias hall porter, chief of security and head cook and bottle-washer, took him on a grand tour of his new demesne, the high-point of which, halfway down one of the stout acres, was the hotel piggery. Dan explained that they had always acquired a number of the porcine brethren at the start of the season, stuffed them to the gills with choice leftovers and, at the end of the summer festivities, their stature and girth considerably enhanced by enormous intakes of the very best commodities, sold them off at a tasty profit.

(From 'Hogging It', story in *In My Write Mind*)

1269 **Your light in the world**

I have mentioned the Hindu mystic Amma several times in my writings. She is a spiritual luminary and an incredible humanitarian, who encourages us to help our fellow human beings, regardless of our particular beliefs, and offers support and wisdom to this end. My favourite quotation of hers in this regard is: *Don't be discouraged by your incapacity to dispel darkness from the world. Light your candle and step forward.*

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1270 **Free at last**

Earlier in my sojourn on the planet – during a period of time that was, regrettably, far too long – I was inexorably drawn to the complex and rarefied. Indeed, had my parents been endowed with the foresight to give me a name which would reflect my later character, they would undoubtedly have called me 'Analysis' – 'Aly' for short, probably. This tendency had a variety of interesting effects on my psyche, the most noteworthy of which was that I became totally screwed up. Having now largely managed to subdue this facet of my personality, I flee from analysis and complexity like a startled hare from a greyhound.

(From 'Right Hand Woman', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1271 **A different world?**

Sir Francis Bacon (English author, courtier and philosopher, 1561–1626) said: *By far the best proof is experience.* How profoundly true this is. Try explaining toothache to a jellyfish! This is one of the many reasons that it is difficult for one person to understand another in particular situations. It is certainly the reason why I believe twelve-step groups are so effective. When one alcoholic talks to another, one drug addict to another, one gambler to another, the result is almost immediate identification and the ability to benefit from one another's experiences. If there were twelve-step groups for politicians, business leaders and others who exert a significant influence on society, the world would be a very different place. The trouble is that most of them would deny that they have any problems that need such a group! If only ...

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1272 **Those endings ...**

Lucille's voice went into melted butter mode: 'I'd like to be original and come up with an ending we haven't used before,' she cooed, 'but you really do say the nicest things.'

'Thank you, gracious one. It is one of the constant challenges of writing, isn't it, to come up with an ending we haven't used before?' I said, coming up with an ending we haven't used before.

(From 'Bilocation', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1273 **Jasmine's common sense**

'Yes, we are committed to taking care of those in need – that's our mission; but there are times when we have to take care of ourselves first, you know. That's the reason you swim every day, remember; it clears the head like nothing else, so you said. You see, we simply cannot give water to others if our own well runs dry.'

(From 'In The Swim', story in *The Jasmine Touch*)

1274 **Responsibility for others?**

There are of course situations in which we are responsible for others: small children, the elderly and infirm for instance. However, in the normal run of things, we are *not* responsible for other people. For example, I am not responsible for my wife, nor she for me. I am responsible for being the best, most loving husband I can be, but I am not responsible for her. The same is true in any other relationship – work, social, casual, etc. This means that each person is responsible for the choices they make, the behaviours they indulge in, and the resultant outcomes. I may sometimes be responsible for helping, to the best of my ability, to sort out these outcomes, but I am not responsible for the original decision nor for the person who made it. If we could realise this fact and implement it in our lives, many relationships would be a whole lot healthier.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1275 **Complexity and analysis versus reflection**

This experience enables me to be clear ... on the difference between complexity and analysis on the one hand and reflection on the other. Complexity and analysis are products of the finite mind whereas reflection is an outreach of the eternal spirit.

(From 'Reflecting on Reflection', essay in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn)

1276 **Trying to put Fred in his place**

'The point being?' said Fred.

'The point being, my permanent, indwelling, psychological pestilence, that you have been living for far too long in total denial about all the problems you cause me ... What you need, and are going to get, is a thundering good kick in the rear end to wake you up – a kick in the figurative sense of course, since we share the same rear end and I am decidedly not a sadomasochist.'

(From 'When The Pupil Is Ready ...', story in *Life With Fred*)

1277 You can't put an old head on young shoulders

When my eldest son was about twelve, he came home from school one day and said that his teacher had used an expression that he didn't understand, and would I explain it to him? I said to myself, 'I earn my living from explaining things; this should be a doddle!' Then, out loud, 'What was the expression?'

'You can't put an old head on young shoulders,' he said.

Well I did my damndest, but no way could I get it across to him. At one point, he retorted, 'I mean I know that; everybody's head is the same age as their shoulders!'

Eventually, I gave up, saying, 'There is a very good reason why I am unable to explain the meaning of that expression to you.'

'What is it, Dad?'

'It's because you can't put an old head on young shoulders!'

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1278 Getting to know oneself

Fred emitted a species of slow-motion sigh, garnished with what one might call gurgling sound effects. Then he stayed quiet for a while and just let me write on. These distinctive sighing silences of his usually indicate that he has more to say on the subject, and I should have seen what was coming ...

(From 'Wakey, Wakey!', story in *Life With Fred*, Vol. 2)

1279 Dealing with strong emotions

When I am feeling bad, I ask my gut feeling, my intuition if you prefer, if this is self-pity or grief. If it is self-pity, I immediately do something to take my mind off myself. If it is grief, I have learned that the only way out is through. If I need to cry, I cry; if I need to scream, I scream; if I need to express my anger in a healthy way (beating the stuffing out of a mattress works well for me!), I do that. Whatever it is, I try my best not to take it out on other people, particularly those close to me.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

1280 **Permitted decadence!**

‘This is brazen self-indulgence at its most delightfully dissipated; no wonder the bath-loving Roman Empire fell asunder,’ I remarked to Fred as we descended into the blissfully warming waters of the Jacuzzi ...’

(From ‘Bubbling Over’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1281 **Gratitude a healer**

In June 2013, I had a stroke and suffered *no* ill effects. I felt immense gratitude and have done ever since. I had very similar symptoms again last week (January 2014) and finished up in hospital again. As it turned out, it wasn’t a stroke and further tests need to be done to determine the cause of the symptoms. The reason I mention it is that I was in a three-patient room in the stroke ward and I was the only one who was mobile. My God, was I thankful – and compassionate for my fellow patients. Gratitude, I have discovered, is excellent medicine. More than that, gratitude can be a great healer.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1282 **Lucille is always compassionate**

‘Lucille, you look distraught and preoccupied – if they are not one and the same. What’s the matter, old thing?’

‘I can’t get my mind off the woman you gave the fiver to just outside the door. There she was, reasonably respectably dressed, with two small children in a double buggy, but having to beg on the street on a cold, damp morning. What must be her circumstances?’

(From ‘Charity Begins ...’, story’ in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1283 **The human mind**

The cosmos brooks no finite realm,
No bounds may be defined;
But there’s a greater universe
In the province of my mind.

(‘World Without End’, poem in *Homage To A Future Hero*)

1284 **God's love and our love**

What ... differentiates God's love from man's love? Two things, I believe:

- ✧ God loves unconditionally – and perfectly so – *all the time*. Humans cannot attain this perfection.
- ✧ God loves without expectation. Humans are not capable of doing this. Even the most selfless soul imaginable who has, let us say, given up his entire adult life in the service of the destitute, has an expectation – not, of course, of the people he serves; to them his loving service is given without any expectation of a return. But he does expect that his chosen path will bring him fulfilment, the knowledge that he has responded to a call to duty, that he is serving his God in the best way he can, or whatever. There is always an expectation, always self-interest – enlightened self-interest granted, but self-interest nevertheless.

One of the stunning things about God is that he loves unconditionally all the time but with *no* expectation of being loved in return. Naturally, he wishes that we will choose to love him in return because he knows how much joy it will bring us (further evidence of selflessness), but the unconditionality of divine love is not diluted by an accompanying expectation.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1285 **Frustration**

'You don't understand why my intellect perpetually gets itself into the kind of tangled knots that you'd expect from a delinquent boy scout, why my blasted emotions constantly execute spectacular impersonations of Mexican jumping beans on a pub crawl, why my ageing physique is acting like a set of hinges that hasn't seen lubricating oil for about a hundred and fifty years, and why my spirit cavorts about the place like a knock-kneed giraffe on a trampoline?'

(From 'Feeling Negative', story in *Life With Fred*)

1286 **Old notes – fresh messages**

During a search for overlooked items for *Perspectives*, I have just come across three disconnected notes I wrote some years ago in one of my notebooks. The first one is a beautiful affirmation of who God is: ‘God is a living, loving, moving, vibrant, passionate being.’ The second is a simple statement of realistic faith. I said to My Beautiful One: ‘I am willing to be whatever way you want me to be – but *this* is the way I am.’ The third is an offbeat expression of hope: ‘My expectations are always fulfilled, but not in the ways that I expect!’

Old notes. Fresh messages; ever new.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1287 **Learning to behave myself**

‘Oh f ...!’

‘Please don’t. You’ll regret it.’

She was right. I would. So I didn’t. I must explain this swearing issue. Lucille almost always minds her Ps and Qs where expletives are concerned, and I am always at pains not to offend her delicate ears; I invariably regret it when I let a coarse four-letter word slip. So, nine times out of ten, I bite my lip and restrain myself.

(From ‘Noticed Anything?, Part 2’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1288 **Priorities?**

‘... but ’twasn’t always a bed of roses, or whatever you’d call it; I had my hard times too, really hard times, really hard.’

‘Had you?’ said Johnny in a compassionate tone of voice.

‘I had,’ confirmed Mick, recalling bitter memories. ‘I remember, back in nineteen and fifty-nine, the best-bred greyhound I ever owned – I almost sold my bloody soul to buy him – died of distemper. ’Twas bloody desperate. I thought, I’d never, ever recover from the shock. I ... God, I hate t’admit it ... I cried shaggin’ buckets. And, do you know what? Didn’t I bury my wife the same day!’

(From ‘Priorities’, essay in *In My Write Mind*)

1289 **The intellect is limited**

The intellect is a fine, God-given mechanism, but it is very limited in its scope and frequently, especially when I misguidedly use it as the arbiter of things spiritual, it can be a major pain in the rear end. The astonishing liberation in my spirit in recent years has, in very large measure, come about because I firmly told my intellect to mind its own so-and-so business, and listened to my deepest heart instead. Thank God.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1290 **Unlucky with pets**

‘Never had any luck with cats, Fred. Loved them like crazy, we did; got them all their inoculations, check-ups and so forth, fed and fondled them, but they all either died or disappeared. It’s not fair. I am declaring an embargo on pets from now on; they only cause heartaches; you get attached to the little creatures, then they snuff it prematurely or do a bunk. So, that’s it as far as I am concerned.’

(From ‘Affirmation’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1291 **Simple but profound wisdom**

Finally ... the quotation that has most helped me in my life. I don’t know who first said it and it is very simple, but if I can do this, then I will be content much of the time, and it’s this: *Blossom where you are planted.*

(From a letter, June 2015)

1292 **No preaching please!**

Nobody will ever be brought into a personal knowledge of the infinite, steadfast, unconditional love of God by being preached at, taught, indoctrinated, coerced, or exhorted to have faith. The only way anybody can be brought into a knowledge of the infinite, steadfast, unconditional love of God is by experiencing that love for themselves.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1293 **Getting one up on Fred**

Fred, however, failed to see the funny side of things.

‘Up yours!’ he muttered morosely.

I should have let it rest at that, but the opportunity was too good to miss: ‘Physically speaking, my dear old half-brain, what’s mine is shared with you, so it would have to be a case of up yours as well!’

(From ‘Stuff It!’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1294 **Bewildering twins**

I was speaking to some close friends one evening when they wanted to know a little about my life. I finished what I had to say with, ‘In conclusion, my life has been excruciatingly painful but also astonishingly beautiful’. And how true that is. It is what I have called elsewhere the pain/joy enigma.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1295 **Materialism**

‘While goods and possessions were never my first priority, I have discovered that materialism is insidiously incremental: the more I acquire, the more I desire. If, in time, I learn to want less, it is not because I have enough, but because some external or internal catalyst has caused my key priorities to change.’

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

1296 **Fixing others**

It is wise for me to stop and think carefully before I do unto others. Do they need my help? Or are they quite capable of doing it – whatever ‘it’ might be – for themselves? Am I depriving them of the joy or pain that is an essential part of their growth by enabling them to take a back seat while I take over? I may mean well, but all I need do to make me think twice is to survey the devastation to humanity and to the planet that has been caused for millennia by the well-meaning.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1297 **Great sadness**

... Who wants a religion like that? [One that glorifies suffering and preaches a conditional love.] The obvious answer, of course, is millions. But is this only because it was the tradition in which they were raised, or because they are not aware that there is so much more available to them? One of the greatest spiritual sadnesses is that most people seem to settle for cheap costume jewellery when they might, at no expense, have the costliest diamonds.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1298 **Lucille gently corrects**

‘De way ah sees it, Lucille, it ain’t never goin’ ta come ta nothin’.’

Lucille, a purist where language is concerned, winced at my unprecedented plunge into coarse transatlantic slang but she is always the soul of politeness and, although one could just detect a hint of disapprobation in her eye, she made no comment beyond: ‘And why, pray, do you perceive that it will never come to anything?’

(From ‘Tit For Tat’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1299 **Control?**

I had management training, the essence of which was to learn how to be in control of premises, cash, stocks, personnel, regulatory compliance, market trend information, consumer responses and, of course, profits. Subsequent industry experience taught me that if any of these got out of control, my job was to get them back into control pronto or risk being fired.

Not surprisingly, I brought the same control mentality to my emotional and spiritual life. It didn’t work; actually, it was a disaster. The pity is that it took me so long to find out. In the emotional and spiritual arenas, the secret is not to hold on for dear life, but to let go absolutely. Simple. But not easy.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1300 **Lucille the Guardian Angel**

I smiled tentatively, like an erring but grateful child. What could I say? I was vanquished – and for my own good. Lucille really is something special! Twice, in a very short space of time, she had pulled me, kicking and screaming, out of the quagmire of despair, and placed me on a pedestal with an optimistic view of the future.

(From ‘That’s Confidence’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1301 **True happiness?**

‘I have always assumed that there is a direct correlation between happiness and one’s life experience at any given moment. In other words – lest I fail to make my meaning clear – when the prevailing experience is good, one is happy, and when bad, unhappy.’

‘Well, that makes sense; pretty obvious, as a matter of fact.’

‘And so I firmly believed for decades, inner companion, but I was mistaken. It doesn’t make sense at all; neither is it obvious – pretty or otherwise. The truth is so simple that I very nearly missed it, to wit: there are no bad experiences, only bad attitudes. Everything depends on one’s attitude.’

(From ‘With Knobs On’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1302 **Computers are limited**

‘I was just checking the magic microchips of which you spoke,’ I continued, ‘and they inform me that you and I have completed eight hundred and two delightful pieces, with a sizeable additional number in various stages of preparation.’

‘We have?’

‘Yes, talented inspirer, we have. What’s more, the spell-checker, grammar checker and thesaurus merely refine the completed opus after the fact. They haven’t yet invented machines that inspire. Much more to the point, my computer is definitely not gentle, compassionate, beautiful and sexy!’

(From ‘Why Bother?’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1303 **You never know with Fred**

From time to time, Fred can moralise in a vague sort of way – when he’s not misbehaving himself, that is, but, on this occasion, I was rather counting on his vote of sympathy. I had, however, overlooked his marked tendency to be unpredictable ...

(From ‘Proper Order’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1304 **Thoughts after a seminar**

A final thought for the present: I have just spotted that, at the end of my notes about the ... evening, I wrote: *He cannot teach me anything; he can only unlock what is already inside.* Can he? Or do I, in fact, already have unrestricted access to everything I need deep down in that indestructible essence of me where God honours me beyond my wildest dreams? Now, there’s a question! And I am pretty certain that the answer is ‘Yes’.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1305 **No go guilt!**

‘It strikes me most forcibly, Fred, that, of all the available emotions, and there are, you will admit, a hell of a lot of them, the most useless and destructive is guilt.’

‘Hmm ...’ said Fred.

‘Yes, definitely, useless and destructive is what it is; downright depressing into the bargain. I think it ought to be made redundant, given early retirement, shot at dawn, hanged, drawn and quartered or earmarked for some similar fate. I mean, what the hell does it think it is, mucking us around like that?’

(From ‘Guilt Trip’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1306 **Gentle learning – a prayer**

‘I want to learn from you; I want to sit at your feet, lean my head on your lap, let you stroke my hair with tenderness as you softly whisper the truth in my ear.’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1307 **Of a friend going through a bad time in his marriage**

‘No doubt about it, they are magnificent creatures, gracefulness the very essence of their make-up. Did you know that swans are among the very few species in the animal kingdom that mate for life?’

‘Stupid bastards!’ he said.

(From ‘Swan Lake’, story in *In My Write Mind*)

1308 **How long does suffering go on?**

It seems to me that when there is no longer any value in suffering, healing is inevitable. In many ways my heart and spirit have been brought into a realm of healing beyond my imagining. I only have to read, for example, the appendices in this volume [not included here] to see that. Other pain still continues. *Sigh!* It looks like there must still be some value in it! When I see the fruit of past anguish, however, I take heart. All is well.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1309 **Compromising my principles?**

The conference I was attending in Bordeaux was one of those deadly serious affairs. When I tell you that the title of my paper was ‘Conformism in Modern Literature’ you will quickly get my drift. Between ourselves, I thought the subject matter was absolute drivel, but they had, to my great surprise, offered me a substantial fee, and Lucille, bless her, had done most of the work.

(From ‘Noticed Anything?, Part 2’, story in *Life With Lucille*, Vol. 2)

1310 **Blindness**

... in those moments when I feel isolated and all alone, I can assume that God has taken me out on a limb spiritually, and then just dumped me there. The truth is that he came out into the wilderness of who I was and, in unutterable love, brought me back into the fold.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1311 **On being betrayed**

All rats will leave a sinking ship;
One sees why they curtail their trip.
'Tis sad, though, you're a copycat,
For I'm no ship, and you're no rat.

(‘Abandon Ship’, poem in *Beyond The Illusion*)

1312 **What women want**

‘Romance and chivalry is what women want, not titillation and carnal gratification. Given your romantic and chivalrous nature, I am surprised that I should feel obliged to remind you of this incontrovertible fact.’

(From ‘People In Glass Houses’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1313 **It’s okay to be me**

It’s okay to be me, warts and all; it really is. And I do not need to beat myself up when I don’t succeed as I think I ought. Progress not perfection.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

1314 **The famous fives – and not by Enid Blyton!**

Fear, despair, grief, confusion, anger.
Hell! What a horrific, toxic combination!
Infinite, steadfast, unconditional, eternal, personal love.
Heavens! What a stupendous, all-powerful antidote!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1315 **Finding spirituality**

My consistent experience has been that the only input that is needed on my part to get to – and remain in – this incredibly precious and nurturing state is to yearn for it. Everything else came as pure gift. Come to think of it, even the yearning came as a gift, for I have nothing that I was not given.

(From ‘Success And Failure’, essay in
Reality And Illusion & Other Essays)

1316 **Relationship with self**

Too long I shunned my other self
That I might be beguiled
By peace of mind, that ne'er I found
Till we were reconciled.

(‘Alter Ego’, poem in *The Voice Of The Man-child*)

1317 **The supreme arrogance**

To assert that one can prove or disprove the existence of God (by which I mean a living, divine being with whom one can have a personal, unconditional, loving relationship) with the finite human intellect or, worse, to claim that one has done so, is *the* supreme arrogance.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1318 **You could have had the costliest diamonds**

All this leads me to emphasise again that the only issue here is this: do you want a life of beauty and promise beyond what you now deem possible? In short, I am not a philosophical or theological apologist; I offer no external proof of the spiritual realm. Rather am I extending to you an invitation to find your own, and presenting information which may tempt you to accept that invitation, so that you may come to know that, ultimately, the spiritual realm is the only thing worth finding. To be on this Earth and not to do so is like going into a jeweller with a blank cheque given to us by a billionaire, and coming out with a few cheap baubles.

(From ‘Memo From A Former Atheist Mk II’,
essay in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

1319 **Types of trust**

Trusting God because of circumstances is understandable; trusting him despite circumstances is courageous, even heroic; but trusting him regardless of circumstances, now that’s a gift – a gift that comes only from the one trusted.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1320 **Just an anecdote**

I heard a simple story at Blackrock after my swim the other day. A very elderly gentleman is being interviewed on the radio, and at the end of the interview, the interviewer says, ‘Mr Murphy, how do you account for the fact that you have lived to such a great, great age?’ The old man scratches his head for a few moments, then says, ‘I think it must be because I was born an awful long time ago!’

(From a letter, July 2010)

1321 **Is there a theme in ‘*Perspectives*’?**

The thought has often crossed my mind that the content of *Perspectives* consists of just random reflections. So I asked myself whether, in fact, there is any theme, a common denominator, a leitmotif that makes this book – more or less – a cohesive whole. The answer came to me almost before I had put my brain in gear: Love. I may ramble off into the wings in some sections, the ‘script’ may not be written in an orderly fashion, nor is much attempt made to edit it or update older items in the book; at times my character defects and my finite perceptions get in the way, but centre stage is held by Love, specifically the infinite, steadfast, unconditional Love of My God, My Beautiful One, and my mind-bogglingly intense Love for him ...

My thousandth piece, written in August 2004, is a poem entitled *Moving On* and the theme is my writing. The final lines are:

But, regardless how recorded
Or the colour of its content
Or the signal on the surface,
Ever penned that every passage
Give a sole and simple message –
That Love is all there is.

My Beautiful One and I *are* Love to each other. What more need be said?

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn – Postscript)

1322 **Condescend, O Lord!**

During a phone call, a friend was reading a quotation which contained the word ‘deign’. She hadn’t come across it before and asked me what it was. I told her it meant ‘condescend’. After the call, I remembered that, when I was young, many prayers began with this word (maybe they still do!). For example: *Deign, O Lord, to grant your humble servant ...*

One of the many things God decidedly is *not* is condescending, and if the content of this volume and [much of my other writing] aren’t sufficient to bring this fact most potently to life for me, then I’ve been wasting my time!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1323 **Each mind a universe**

‘I was only observing, my dearest Muse, that each mind is in itself a universe. I mean, just look inside mine – and who better than you to do that? Despite the formidable force that the relatively tiny employed segment clearly represents, you will perceive the vast regions of uncharted territory. If the entire power of this apparatus were to be harnessed, what mountains of the unachievable might I not scale? And the same is true, presumably, of every human being.’

(From ‘Think Big’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1324 **The nature of patience**

Having patience doesn’t mean being long-suffering; it means being content with ‘what is’ until it is replaced by another ‘what is’ – which will occur, actually, in the next split second. This means that virtually no waiting is required, in which case patience is unnecessary. Or, to put it another way, living in the ‘now’ is the only viable option for a contented life (although this is not an absolute; see my essay ‘How Now’ in *Beneath The Surface*, 2nd edn). Simple concept to grasp; difficult, often impossible, for me to implement. That’s the human condition, I suppose. *Sigh!* I just need patience to wait until it passes!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1325 **When to reach out to others**

When and how to hit the nail on the head is decided not by the hammer but by the carpenter ...

All that has to happen is for God to love me, me to love God, then just relax and watch the synergy touch others.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1326 **Fixed opinions?**

I notice that, of latter years, I have a fixed opinion on hardly anything, only perspectives that are valid for me in the present time. In addition, I do not feel the need to express my opinion when in company anything like as often as I used to. Most people don't want to hear it anyway; they only want a forum to express their own points of view. So, usually, I stay quiet and do most of the listening. This is a very great freedom.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1327 **Muses have it easy; pity the writer**

'It's all very fine for you, Lucille; you just sit there, day in day out, and intermittently toss out unhewn chunks of inspiration. It is I who have to exert myself to chisel and fashion them into articulate pieces. On top of which, musing is the only thing with which you have to concern yourself. I, on the other hand, have many and irksome tasks to accomplish in the course of my daily dedication to duty.'

(From 'The Goddess Of Affirmation', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1328 **Analysing a facial expression**

He smirked smugly. Come to think of it, there is no need to say that he smirked smugly, is there? The 'smugly' is unnecessary because a smirk is, of its very character, decidedly smug, isn't it? I mean, one cannot conceive of somebody smirking lovingly or smirking sorrowfully, can one? Anyway Fred, as I say – whether or not you agree with my semantic analysis – smirked.

(From 'The Last Laugh', story in *Life With Fred*)

1329 **The best of friendships**

The best of friendships – the kind we have – operate in such a way that neither friend places time shackles on the other, so that even if months go by without any contact, they simply take up where they left off.

(From a letter, August 2007)

1330 **The folly of exclusive rightness**

If I am right, who is wrong? Nobody! Not necessarily that is. In the secular world in which we live, I perceive that almost every time a person claims to be right, that claim is accompanied by an overt statement or a thinly veiled implication that somebody else is wrong. Religion, politics, and philosophy are particularly prone to this ‘folly of exclusive rightness’.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1331 **Seeking advice**

When I need advice I ask one or, at most, two people I trust. If I ask too many people, eventually the advice will conflict and I will end up even more confused.

(From *Living With The Blues*)

1332 **Music heals**

‘... and I’ll tell you something else. When we’re listening to music, I feel more in harmony with you than at almost any other time. The desire to tease, snipe and criticise sort of goes on hold, if you know what I mean,’ said Fred.

(From ‘Striking The Right Note’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1333 **On environmental conservation**

For he who screws the planet
screws himself –
A grotesque case of incest.

(From ‘What About The Planet?’, poem in *Grin And Bear It!*)

1334 **Indecision**

Though I make the wrong choice, it is better far than prolonged indecision, for indecision paralyses, whereas I can always turn back or take a new direction if I am on the wrong road. In that there is no shame.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1335 **Fred does have a better nature**

I was expecting one of Fred's customary smart-ass retorts, and I really didn't care. Things couldn't be much worse anyway, so it was of little significance. However, to my surprise, he appeared greatly distressed. The trauma of which I had apprised him had, for some strange reason, moved him profoundly. I could sense that he was struggling to find words, and eventually succeeded in producing a combination of same which I never would have expected from him. 'Will ... will you allow me to ... er ... pray for you?' he asked, in childlike humility.

(From 'Sweet Sixteen', story in *Life With Fred*)

1336 **Living in a crazy world**

I live in a crazy world, but I don't have to live crazy in the world, because I am guided through the minefield of madness from the 'Control Centre' deep within – a 'control' that emanates entirely from Infinite, Steadfast, Unconditional Love.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1337 **Synergy**

When entities combine, whether in a marriage, a merger or a mission, the product of the union will be far greater than the sum of the individual parts. There are three requirements, however, for the realisation of this product: openness of mind, willingness to change, and vision to capitalise on the synergies created. Without these qualities, the opposite outcomes are inevitable: dilution, disillusionment and decline.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1338 **The one essential**

The thought struck me today ... that if, for some strange reason, I had to be stripped of everything, but was granted the concession of retaining just one thing or quality, it would be love. For once I have love – divine, unconditional love to be specific – I have everything. And I have it. That is why, when I lose sight of that transcendent, unalterable fact in times of utter darkness, the illusion of loss is so devastating.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1339 **A moment of self-doubt**

‘I’ve always thought rather a lot of that quotation by Emerson: *What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us*. Lately, however, I’m beginning to doubt its veracity, Fred. I mean, the more I look inside, the more I’m convinced that there is little or nothing in there, and even what little there is – in terms of wisdom and practicality – is distinctly suspect.’

(From ‘Turning Tables’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1340 **I’ve had enough!**

So that’s the sum of where I sit:
To scant subjection I’ll submit.
In short, I’m taking no more shit.
So be it!

(From ‘Alliteration To The Rescue’, poem in
No Rest For The Wicked)

1341 **Unorthodox antidote**

I had dearly wanted to express myself in the coarser idioms of my native tongue in order to dispel my anguish and frustration. There is nothing like a couple of well-chosen, four-letter words to cause an existential crisis to beat a hasty retreat ...

(From ‘Lucille To The Rescue’, story in *Life With Lucille*)

1342 **A word to myself about human limitations**

‘Look, Ken, you know well by now that there are some things which standard issue human faculties are utterly incapable of revealing to you or explaining, so just give up the quest for understanding. Your deepest heart – the indestructible essence at the core of your being – knows it to be true without question; all you have to do is accept it. Right then, so be it!’

(From ‘Appendix I’, *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1343 **Which is the ‘right’ way?**

Countless people experience great heartache over which religious beliefs are the right ones. From where I’m standing, there is absolutely no need to agonise over this question. God can manifest in whatever way he chooses – through a set of religious beliefs and practices or in any other manner that he sees fit. His ways are infinite in the absolute sense of that word, and cannot be limited by human perceptions.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1344 **The real and unreal God**

The God I have come to *know* is soft and loving, tender and compassionate, and gentle and gracious beyond measure. The God who is a hard taskmaster, drives me to perfection and keeps me on edge simply does not exist. That ‘God’ is an unwelcome and troublesome but utterly fictitious residue of misguided formation and skewed conditioning.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1345 **Giving Fred what for?**

... This outburst was too much, so I decided to kick Fred’s arse, the lazy sod, and tell him to go out and get a bloody job himself. But I thought better of it. I had little desire to become a schizophrenic, and even less to achieve fame by becoming the first one in history to split body as well as mind!

(From ‘Going Public?’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1346 **What ‘*Perspectives*’ is**

As an aside, I sometimes wonder whether, when I have gone on to better things, *Perspectives* (much of which nobody has ever seen)* will recede into the mists of oblivion, or will have meaning for even a small number of readers in the future. If the latter should turn out to be the case, I just want to warn you, my dear future reader, that if you ever describe the contents of this book (or indeed any of my other writings) as ‘Ken O’Sullivan’s theology’ I shall come back to haunt you! And that’s a promise. Whatever may be its flaws and limitations, *Perspectives* and much of my other work is but an account of an ineffably beautiful love affair with God. In other words, it is a sincere attempt to describe what is largely indescribable.

(From ‘Afterword’, *Perspectives*, 3rd edn)

* Although I have now released a large number of extracts in this book.

1347 **When a leader fails to motivate**

The old warrior blinked in disbelief, mumbled something about it not being important, turned on his heel and shuffled away, disconsolate, no heart left for the struggle. For the great white chief, to whom he had long looked for leadership, had finally shut himself off.

(From ‘The Great White Chief’, essay in *In My Write Mind*)

1348 **Oneness with God**

Many speak of ‘seeking God’, ‘following God’ or ‘being on a journey to God’. Since I am one with God, all of these expressions are inappropriate. Neither, quite obviously, does being one with God make ‘I am God’ appropriate either. Really the expression one uses is irrelevant. *Knowing* that oneness in my essence – in that place beyond language – is all that counts.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1349 **Change the thinking**

Like everything else I offer, this perspective is just a suggestion: a thought is just a thought (like your recent ‘I feel I’m only making matters worse’). It has no power of itself unless we choose to accord it power; then it takes root in the subconscious as if it were given wisdom, and causes untold emotional turmoil. Maybe you’d consider choosing to replace it with something like: ‘I’m a good man; I’m helping others and that’s good for me and them – and God didn’t bring me this far to let life throw me on its scrap heap.’ As I say, just a suggestion.

(From a letter, April 2015)

1350 **Now there’s a question!**

I used to think that, in seeking the ‘Truth’ I was on a quest for a universal truth that applies to all. Eventually it struck me that the only search with which I need concern myself is for the truth that applies to me now. This discovery has thankfully removed a huge amount of frustration and made me far more tolerant and understanding of others.

Mind you, in moments of greater awareness, I sometimes ask myself, ‘Why search for what I already have?’ Now, there’s a question!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1351 **Keep trying**

‘If I had a tenner for each of the many antidotes to the human condition that I have tried already, I’d pay off the bloody mortgage and buy a Lamborghini or two with the change.’

(From ‘Watch It!’, story in *Life With Fred*)

1352 **Evil is limited**

In discussion ... today, she gave me clarity on something and it gave me great consolation. She said, ‘Evil can simulate beauty but it cannot reproduce love.’

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1353 **Very little knowledge is needful**

I laughed when you said that I could keep you up to date with what is going on in the world. I would be your worst possible choice! I hardly ever read a newspaper or watch television or listen to radio news bulletins; and I use the internet very sparingly. Yet, strangely, I know what is going on – but only in broad outline. I find that the world is obsessed with information (an observation, not a judgement, I hasten to add) and that, for me, really very little knowledge is needful. Each morning and evening I ask ... the God of my understanding to touch the most desolate souls on Earth with his love, and I know my prayer is heard, but I don't need to know the horrific details of their plight or see harrowing pictures in the media. They won't make my prayer any more effective and will only pull me down, because I have a tendency to soak up other people's pain.

(From a letter, June 2004)

1354 **A heavy responsibility**

'I am trying to correct these examination papers ... What I am doing is fraught with world-shattering importance. Young people's futures could depend on my deliberations and pen-strokes.'

(From 'Correction', story in *Life With Fred*)

1355 **Well-meaning?**

Well-meaning? Don't talk to me about the well-meaning. The planet has been virtually laid waste by the well-meaning. God save us from the well-meaning!

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1356 **Medicine!**

To use medical imagery, occasional, even regular injections of God's love are no longer adequate. I need a continuous drip. And I have it. But I don't always feel it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1357 **Those strappy shoes**

Her shoes are but fusions of thin strips and buckles,
Latticed and looped from ankle to toe,
A matrix of holes on each fetching extremity;
More absence than substance,
As she makes her entrance
In footwear that's flimsy
But strangely alluring,
Both stylish and sexy,
Arousing much interest
In menfolk who cannot avert their gaze
From an exquisite mesh of thongs and flesh,
Irresistible gaps that can only be found
Between the straps of a networked shoe
On a female's dainty foot.
Or, more pertinently put:
A few feet of plastic,
Seductively shoed,
Can do something drastic
To a male in the mood.
Well, whatever turns you on!

(‘Whatever Turns You On’, poem in *One By One*)

1358 **Live and let live**

As I am in the habit of saying on occasion, half-jokingly, half seriously, I have enough trouble trying to change myself without embarking upon a mission to change the world!

(From ‘Are We Meant To Be Competitive?’, essay in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

1359 **Accepting our imperfection**

I saw a lovely quotation from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning this morning. It's about accepting ourselves in our imperfection: *With stammering lips and insufficient sound, I strive and struggle to deliver right the music of my nature.*

(From a letter, March 2007)

1360 **Lucille's ultimate loyalty**

'Please,' she pleaded, 'just listen. I have always adopted a professional approach to my work. While I admired many of my writers, each assignment was just another job, and I always adhered to a strict policy of staying at a safe emotional distance. I tried to do the same with you for a little while, too, but I find that, almost imperceptibly, I have been drawn into a union with you so close that even eternity could not break the bond, and I have asked that, when you go to your eternal reward, I be released from my earthbound duties and be allowed to attain my final destination – to become pure spirit, so that I can be near you always. And Zeus, honouring his daughter's heartfelt request, has so ordained.'

(From 'Prelude To Paradise', story in *Life With Lucille*)

1361 **Last laugh**

One afternoon toward the end of the summer term, I was queuing in the canteen for a Mars Bar to get me through the last lecture of the day, and witnessed the following exchange between the student in front of me, who was surveying the vast array of snacks with an air of pre-exam bewilderment, and the canteen lady, who was surveying the student with an air of impatient enquiry.

Student (scratching head):

'Have you got any normal crisps?'

Canteen lady (to the accompaniment of a mirthless laugh):

'Don't you know by now that there's nothing normal about this place?'

(From *Fawlty Toorism, Millennium Edition*)

1362 **Being human**

The only viable response to *every* situation in my life is love. Being human I certainly cannot always rise to this ideal, but I accept my humanness, and look to him to compensate for my deficiencies. He always does, but I don't always see it.

(From *Perspectives*, 4th edn)

1363 **Willingness is the key**

I never cease to be amazed at the astonishing transformations people have brought about in their lives by becoming willing to change or, even if reluctant, at least being willing to become willing. When I provide the willingness, the ability follows, often in ways that I don't understand.

(From 'Compliments And Self-Esteem', essay in
Beneath The Surface, 2nd edn)

1364 **More than one way**

'Contrary to popular belief, there is more than one way of seeing and, in like manner, there is more than one way of knowing and more than one way of understanding. All will be revealed in due season ...'

(From the novel *Black On Magenta*)

1365 **Fred puts his finger on the nub**

'Well, that's it, Fred, old pal. *Life With Fred – Inside My Head* composed over many years, now typed up, proofread and ready for launching on the eagerly waiting public. Quite an achievement, even if I do say so ourselves. The book, one might say, has now been written.'

'Yes, but ...' said Fred, leaving the sentence unfinished. Exasperating as usual, but I don't suppose he's going to change at this stage of the game. I have long since accepted, if reluctantly, that I am stuck with him as he is.

'Yes, but what?'

My psychic sidekick smiled knowingly at me and winked: 'Yes, the book has now been written – but the story goes on!'

I thought about this for a few moments, then smiled knowingly back and raised my mug of tea in a heartfelt toast. 'Here's to the future, then!'

('Postscript', story in *Life With Fred*)

1366 **A prayer of appreciation**

You are:

The light to see me through each day,
The hope to keep despair at bay,
The hand to guide me, come what may,
And my companion across the desert.

You are:

The oasis where to lay my head,
My solace when I'm filled with dread,
My signpost to what lies ahead,
And the fountain of unfailing love.

You are:

The voice of all that is eternal,
A shield from every wile infernal,
Respite in my hours nocturnal,
And the wellspring of delight and peace.

You are:

The echo to my music's ring,
The words of every song I sing,
The air on which my life takes wing,
And my partner in the Dance of Forever.

You are:

The lungs to breathe,
My lips to talk,
The eyes to see,
My feet to walk
And reach the destination.

You are:

The greatest gift that e'er begot
A heart that beats and ne'er forgot
That you're the me that I am not,
In wakefulness and sleeping.

You are:

The earthly form my heart esteems,
Though you are infinite, it seems,
For you are substance born of dreams;
And yet ... the dreams are substance.

(*'The Substance Of Dreams'*, poem in *The Substance Of Dreams*)

1367 **My all-time favourite piece of writing**

He is the love of my life,
The passion of my existence,
The reason for my being,
The cause of my seeing
The star in the night sky.
From deep within me,
The essence of me,
He honours me,
The beloved,
The only one.
He finds no fault with me;
She sees no wrong in me.
She dances with me,
My beautiful one,
Romantic and tender
To my gentle surrender;
Enfolds me in her embrace,
Loving me from darkness into light.
She shelters me from harm,
Rejoices in me,
Delights in me,
And leads me in the dance of forever.
I lose my self in him,
I find myself in her.
They encircle me with angels.
We are 'hopelessly' in love.

(*'The Dance Of Forever'*, poem in *The Dance Of Forever*)

1368 **No end in sight ...**

Many readings I attend
Where there is a disconcerting absence of applause
At the culmination of the poet's delivery.
Displaying neither lack of courtesy nor silent disapproval,
It simply does not dawn upon the audience
That the piece has reached its conclusion.
It terminates in the poet's mind, one assumes,

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But not in the untutored perceptions of the listeners,
Who – with the studied affectation of aspiring literati –
Pretend to be suitably impressed
By the elevated sentiments and linguistic finery,
But haven't the foggiest idea what the poem is about.
The writer – and this is a very popular convention –
Selects an obscure chunk of his experience
Or a cryptic segment of his imagination,
Camouflages it in dense verbal foliage,
Garnishes the resulting opus with abstruse symbolism,
And, in this manifestly indigestible format,
Dishes it up for human consumption.

My approach is rather more simplistic;
I never got beyond the basic guidelines
I absorbed from my first English teacher:
I still like a beginning, a middle and an end.
Small wonder I'm not famous;
I'm too up front with my stuff.
Beginnings, middles and ends are not cool,
Particularly ends, it would seem.
The trick, so I am led to believe,
Is to keep the audience guessing –
Leave it all hanging in mid-air, so to speak –
The prevailing literary fashion demanding
That writers possess a substantial talent for mystique.
The truth, as any five-year-old will quickly point out
(Children are not fooled by such masquerades),
Is that most poets don't know what they want to say
In the first place,
Or who, even if they do,
Invariably sacrifice their capacity to call a spade a spade
To the insatiable god of chic complexity.

Of course, I could be blind,
Conceivably narrow-minded,
Possibly – though loath am I to admit it – even jealous.
Perhaps, then, I might contrive to go with the flow,

Condescend to bow to the trend, as it were.
To mark, therefore, my late vocation –
Nay, my reluctant conversion – to the cult of the esoteric,
I shall make a *prima facie* adjustment to my *modus scribendi*
(Nothing like a touch of Latin to invoke mystique,
I always think),
And wax devious and mysterious,
For – as you can readily perceive –
This humble offering has a tangible beginning,
An identifiable middle of sorts,
But, somehow, never manages to ...
(‘Mystique’, poem in *When The Bug Bites*)

1369 **Listening to the music**

Many years ago, I came across a colleague at work who, like me, loved classical music. Every two or three weeks, he came down to our house to share an evening of symphonies, concertos, ballets and more – on vinyl records at the time, of course. I would sit back in the armchair in front of the open fire, close my eyes, and drink in the beauty of what I was hearing. Frequently during the impromptu concert, however, he would say, ‘Do you hear that scratch? There’s another hiss. The French horn is off key’, and so forth. Apart from these interruptions, I always enjoyed the evening. He didn’t. I heard the music; he heard the scratches, the hisses and the flaws.

So, nothing is perfect. What was this book like for you? Maybe there were things that irritated you, even ruffled your feathers. A word out of place, a turn of phrase or a whole passage that you found unappealing or even cringeworthy; worse, concepts or philosophies that you hold dear with which I took issue. That’s all perfectly understandable. I would be the first to admit that some of the material offered here proposes a way of seeing – or, more appropriately, a way of being – that is, sadly, not universally held to be of value. And the book may also have a number of defects; I only wish I knew where they were.

Pieces Of Mind: The Collection

I have never been under the naïve illusion that what I write will appeal to everybody. However, I would like to make a final suggestion. If *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection* is really not your cup of tea right now, don't discard it; put it aside for a little while, then take the book out again and devote a quiet evening or two to it. Second time round, make a decision consciously to listen to the music rather than the scratches, the hisses and the flaws. After all, the only thing you have to lose is a few hours of your time. It might turn out to be well worth the effort.

(Adapted from 'Bonus Time' in *Beyond The Rainbow*)

1370 **A blessing to end**

May
Each pain bring its learning,
Each hurt its discerning,
Each memory its healing,
Each joy its revealing,
Each day its providing,
Each moment abiding
 In One who's all caring;
 And love before all,
 And love within all,
 And love after all.

(‘A Blessing’, poem in *The Voice Of The Man-child*)

APPENDIX

Choice

Anybody who thinks that the ego-driven, materialistic ways of the world in which we live constitute a blueprint for the optimal society is seriously deluded. Whether we like it or not, we live in a crazy world, but we don't have to live crazy in the world. We have choice. What's critical is how we use it.

Memo From A Former Atheist

(Re: the book *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins)¹

There are only two ways to live your life: one as if nothing is a miracle, the other as if everything is a miracle.

(Albert Einstein)

Before we begin, I have a particular request to make of you: please make a decision to keep an open mind on what you are about to read. Thank you.

Examine history. Time and again, it has been more than amply displayed that highly developed intellects, skilled in rhetoric and adept at manipulating facts and ideas, can appear to prove or justify virtually anything. The outcomes of such efforts, which are heightened where the audience is impressionable, are often bizarre and sometimes tragic, not least in the province of organised religion, as Richard Dawkins points out. On this point we are in agreement. Indeed, ‘nothing so masks the face of God as religion’.² Thereafter, however, using arguments that are seductive but vacuous, he merely follows in

¹ There is a much more detailed Mk II version of this essay.

² Martin Buber (1878–1965), Austrian-born Jewish philosopher. NB The quotation is to be taken in context, not as a blanket condemnation of all religion.

the rhetorical, manipulative tradition, but his entire thesis is based on a false premise. The existence or non-existence of God *cannot* be proved by the intellect, no matter how articulate, learned or persuasive the logic may appear to be. The most one can reasonably expect from the unaided intellect is a superficially plausible rationale as to why one might believe in God or why one might not, but no proof. We possess finite human intellects to deal with finite human situations and when we attempt to press them into service to decipher – or, as in this case, deny – the infinite (the Divine, if you prefer), we indulge in the bizarre behaviour to which I have alluded.

It is critical to this essay to emphasise that, in using the word ‘God’, I mean it to denote a loving Divine being with whom one may form an intimate personal relationship. An increasing number of scientists and philosophers are deducing from the constantly emerging evidence that there must be a creative Intelligence behind the incredible complexities of the universe in general and the world we inhabit in particular. This is a conclusion one *can* reach with the intellect.

Most things in the material world that are not self-evident lend themselves to the provision of a proof that is acceptable to the general populace. Not so in matters of the spirit. Knowledge of God comes from beyond the boundaries of the material, the intellect, language or the senses, in other words from profound personal experience in the spiritual realm, and each person must find his or her own proof. Nobody else’s will convince. The poet John Keats said, *Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced*. Since Dawkins and his fellow atheists do not accept the existence of the realm of the spirit, they are highly unlikely to seek it and experience the ultimate reality for themselves. Well, their loss.

Perhaps I am doing the author an injustice, but it seems to me that the book’s dominant motif can effectively be summed up in one sentence: Because I have not experienced it and/or it will not yield to scientific investigation, it does not exist. Anybody who has ever fallen in love could easily counter that proposition! Dawkins is by no means the first atheist to

take this or a similar position, and if you want to spend money and time on this latest treatment of an old and hackneyed theme, go ahead. Alternatively, you might consider yearning for and then seeking something infinitely more precious and enduring than atheism. As an aside, but a relevant one, commentators point out that the so-called ‘new atheism’ espoused by people like Dawkins can be as hectoring, dogmatic and potentially menacing as the religions it denounces.

In keeping with the thrust of this piece, I have no desire to win you over by means of intellectual argument. Therefore I shall simply proceed with a question based on a pertinent quotation:

There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance – that principle is contempt prior to investigation.³

And now the question: have you given a *genuine, sustained* and *unbiased* trial to the realm of the spirit? If you have *truly* exerted yourself along these lines and found the process fruitless, I have nothing further to say beyond suggesting that a renewed quest might well produce an entirely different result. If you have not, what have you got to lose by making an honest endeavour to verify if there is something to be discovered, the existence of which you have hitherto believed to be impossible? Nobody else but you has to know that you have embarked on this inner journey. The only thing you may need, after an appropriate period of time, is the humility to acknowledge that your previous position is no longer tenable. For a couple of years in the early 1990s, I believed absolutely nothing; worse, I was certain that there was nothing to be believed. It all turned out to be a pernicious illusion which was replaced by a stupendously beautiful awakening to a divine presence beyond the dreams of a thousand lifetimes. That sounds like an exaggeration but it is not. And this presence

³ Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), British philosopher.

has never left me since then. For this reason, I can assure you both from experience and from the heart, that admitting one has abandoned old views, no matter how strongly held, is a very small price to pay for the incredible wonders you will find. Try it! Not willing? Permit me, then, to pose two further questions:

- ⌘ Why do you wish to cling so tenaciously to a worldview which offers little or no enduring hope, believing perhaps that there couldn't possibly be an all-powerful, all-loving, creative Intelligence and that, therefore, life originated out of nothing, means nothing, and proceeds nowhere?
- ⌘ How would you regard the scientist who refused to perform a certain experiment lest it prove his pet theory wrong? Think about it.

Postscript

A concluding question, if I may: did you keep a truly open mind on the topic just covered? You did? Really?

Let's be honest. Having an open mind is one of the characteristics with which we most like to credit ourselves, and one which we like to have others ascribe to us. The truth of the matter is that the vast majority of human beings, whether they are aware of it or not, are prisoners of their social, religious, educational, political and cultural conditioning and the resulting prejudices. The moment somebody says or writes something that triggers a bias or offers a perception that is at variance with our view of the world, or simply presents an appearance or opinion we don't like, the shutters come down and we switch off. Alternatively we make judgements on the person in order to make ourselves feel superior or protect ourselves from viewpoints that threaten our comfort zone.

The only consolation we may draw from this dismal, closed-minded performance is that we are in very good company, always assuming that one considers almost everybody else on the planet good company. In case it sounds like I am pontificating from on high, I assure you that I can

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claim no dispensation from this facet of the human condition. In short, the man or woman with a truly open mind is a rare phenomenon. Perhaps you might give that some thought, too. Then, maybe, consider reading this essay again. If you do so with an open mind and, more importantly, with an open spirit, and then follow the path suggested: you never know what undreamed-of presences you might discover. The seeking is worth it beyond measure. Believe me.



A Sort Of Biographical Note

As his father (Kerry) and mother (Limerick) had been obliged to emigrate to the neighbouring island to earn a living, Ken made his first appearance in the shire of Surrey during the war (though he's not saying which one). Unexpected teenage relocation from a quiet London suburb to a small town in the land of his ancestors was a culture shock from which he has never fully recovered, although he will now readily concede that Ireland is the place he wants to be. Former hotelier, he took early retirement from his post as a lecturer on topics ranging from ethics to effluent, and is now a freelance whatever-takes-his-fancy; possessor of many gifts which he gratefully acknowledges, for to deny the gifts would be to deny the giver; permanent owner of an acute sense of humour; has strong workaholic tendencies but is endeavouring to become lazy.

Writes primarily for personal enjoyment and therapy but likes to share the resulting 'pieces' – as he calls them – with anybody who will humour him. Has had a small amount of work published but discovered that it didn't make him one bit happier, and now gets much more enjoyment out of writing individual pieces and putting together privately produced books. Almost incapable of grasping the fundamentals of rhyme, metre and so forth but contrives, nevertheless, to write in a style that might be described, if one were in a generous frame of mind, as vaguely poetic; this is probably why most of

his work is in prose. A late vocation to iconoclasm, he has scant regard for poetic convention, dislikes the humbug that he perceives to pervade much of matters literary, and is well aware that a) nobody gives a shit what he thinks, especially those immersed in the humbug of matters literary, and b) his views may well be born of ignorance, jealousy or both. That said, he greatly admires scholars with a genuine love of English.

Favourite authors: P.G. Wodehouse, Jane Austen and, of course, Ken O’Sullivan – not much point in producing all this stuff if he doesn’t get a kick out of it himself, is there? Greatest blessing: a loving wife who stoically tolerates his idiosyncrasies. Second greatest blessing: four wonderful, adult children who do likewise. Third greatest blessing: seven beautiful grandchildren who, doubtless, will learn to do the same.

Could be considered a bit of a dreamer but once wrote of his writing: ‘I am in fact my only fan’, which shows that he’s a realist. Strange mixture of rebel, conformist, tough outer shell (well, sort of), soft-as-putty interior, foreground music lover, background music hater, raconteur, linguist and coffee shop addict; dislikes television and just about tolerates the internet; complex thinker but a lover of the simple life; often feels as if his body resides in one dimension and his spirit in another which can be pretty uncomfortable; in love with Nature and all the gifts of the Creator; once spontaneously described Connemara as his ‘spiritual home’. Hopelessly romantic and oversensitive which, as he says himself, is a wonderful asset for producing stories, essays, poems and so forth, but is damn all use in daily living.



A More Conventional Biographical Note

Ken's father and mother had emigrated to England in the late 1930s, and he was born in Surrey in the early 1940s. In 1956, the family returned to Ireland and purchased the Central Hotel in Ballybunion in County Kerry. Sadly, his mother died only a few months after their return.

He pursued the four-year course in Shannon College of Hotel Management, and took over the direction of the hotel (later renamed Ambassador) in 1965. In the late 60s, the company embarked on an expansion programme to enlarge the hotel from 27 to 130 bedrooms, a new ballroom/conference complex, a shopping mall and a rooftop restaurant, and upgrading it from two star to four star. However, instead of the rapid growth in tourism forecast for the late 60s and early 70s, there was a sharp decline because of the Northern Ireland situation and the business was forced into liquidation in 1974. Apart from managing the hotel, Ken actively marketed the business in Europe and the United States.

In late 1973, he took up a position as lecturer in Communications and Marketing in the Hotel School of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), later serving as Head of the Department of Hotel & Catering Management for eight years.

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He started writing stories, essays and poems seriously in 1989, and gave many writing workshops and readings during his career as a lecturer in GMIT, from which he took early retirement in 2000. The workshops were designed to encourage rather than instruct, and he was often amazed at what students subsequently produced for him. Toward the end of his career in GMIT, he was writer in residence on the Galway Bay FM Arts Show for nearly three years and regularly broadcast, stories, essays and poems.

He has had a small amount of work published in anthologies and newspapers. However, he derives much greater fulfilment from bringing out privately produced books of his writing for giving to friends and other people who might express an interest in his work. There are over sixty different titles and there are more than three thousand of the books in circulation together with a huge number of PDF copies in cyberspace. He is particularly fond of *Life With Lucille – Muse Of Muses*, *Life With Fred – Inside My Head*, and his first novel *Black On Magenta*. The first tells of his close relationship with his Muse, nearly three thousand years old but still gorgeous! The second relates his volatile, often hilarious, relationship with his inner voice or conscience. Each of these two books contains over one hundred stories. And *Black On Magenta* is a beautiful and unusual tale of love which is partially based on a true story. Another favourite is *Pieces Of Mind*, the first edition of which, in 2001, was a coffee table collection of three hundred short extracts from his writings. It is now in its third edition with nearly fourteen hundred items, and is titled *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection*.

In addition to producing the writing, Ken enjoys reading his work to audiences, and he is also a raconteur; so, several times a year he presents what he calls his ‘One-Man Show’ to groups in and around his home city of Galway in the West of Ireland. It is composed of a selection of both light-hearted and serious items from his writings, punctuated with hilarious anecdotes he has collected on his journey through life.

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Brendan Kennelly, one of Ireland's best-loved poets, said of his work: 'I really enjoyed your writing. Your voice is unusually fine, people should hear it.'

Ken is married to Carmel Costello and they have four adult children: Paul, Barry, Julie and Alan; three daughters-in-law: Isabelle, Slavka and Una; and seven grandchildren, Lara, Matthew, Finn, Seán, Ryan, Léa and Ella.



People And Places

People

Adonis. Handsome, youthful figure in Greek mythology.

Aladdin. Central figure of a popular pantomime story, based on a Middle Eastern folk tale.

Amma (*b.* 1953). An inspirational Hindu mystic, spiritual luminary and humanitarian. See www.amma.org; note particularly the links to her global charities, which do amazing work.

Jane Austen (1775–1817). English writer, who through her novels provided a social commentary on the British landed gentry in Georgian times.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750). German composer and musician of the baroque period.

Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626). First Viscount St Alban. English philosopher, statesman, scientist, jurist, orator and author.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861). English poet.

Dave Barry (*b.* 1947). American author and humorist.

The Beatles. English pop band, formed in Liverpool in 1960, comprising John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr.

Melody Beattie (*b.* 1948). Inspirational American author and speaker. Her best-known book is *Codependent No More* (1986).

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827). Influential German composer.

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- Black On Magenta*, Ken's novel. Characters: Alison Langley, Aurélie Peyroux, Barbara Freeman, David Langley, Elizabeth and Gerald Langley, Greg Langley, Robert Clarke, Tomas (no second name).
- Boadicea (also Boudica or Boudicca) (*d. c.* AD 61). Queen of the British Celtic Iceni tribe who led an unsuccessful uprising against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire.
- Andrea Bocelli (*b.* 1958). Italian classical cross-over singer, songwriter and recording artist.
- Brontë sisters: Charlotte (1816–1865), Emily (1818–1848) and Anne (1820–1849). Literary family associated with the village of Haworth, Yorkshire, England.
- Martin Buber (1878–1965). Austrian-born Jewish philosopher.
- John Calvin (1509–1564). French theologian, after whom the religion Calvinism is named.
- Julia B. Cameron (*b.* 1948). American teacher, author, artist, poet, playwright, novelist, filmmaker, composer, and journalist. She is best known for her book *The Artist's Way* (1992).
- José Carreras (*b.* 1946). Spanish tenor, particularly known for his performances in the operas of *Verdi* and *Puccini*.
- Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616). Spanish novelist, poet and playwright. His best-known work is *Don Quixote*.
- Cinderella. Popular folk tale, of which there are many variants, embodying a myth-element of unjust oppression and triumphant reward.
- Cleopatra (69–30 BC). Last active ruler of Ptolemaic Egypt, immortalised in both history and fable.
- Julien Clerc (*b.* 1947, Paul Alain Clerc). French singer and songwriter.
- Paulo Coelho de Souza (*b.* 1947). Influential Brazilian novelist. *The Alchemist* was first published in 1988 but didn't become a bestseller until 1994; it has sold 83 million copies.
- Ernesto Cortázar II (1940–2004). Mexican classical composer and pianist. He composed background music for more than seventy-five motion pictures.
- Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). Italian polymath: invention, painting, sculpting, architecture, science, music, mathematics, and much more.

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- Clinton Richard Dawkins (*b.* 1941). English ethologist, evolutionary biologist and author. He is an atheist, and is well known for his criticism of creationism and intelligent design.
- René Descartes (1596–1650). French philosopher and mathematician.
- Charles Dickens (1812–1870). English writer and social critic. He created some of the world’s best-known fictional characters and is regarded by many as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era.
- Céline Dion (*b.* 1969). French Canadian singer. Won the Eurovision Song Contest for Switzerland in 1988.
- Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881). First Earl of Beaconsfield. British politician who twice served as prime minister of the United Kingdom.
- Albert Einstein (1879–1955). A brilliant, German-born theoretical physicist.
- George Elliot (1819–1880). Pen name of Mary Anne Evans, a Victorian English novelist, poet, journalist and translator.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882). American poet, essayist and philosopher.
- Erato and Urania. Two of the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, each regarded as a protectress (or Muse) of a different art or science. Erato was the original name of Ken’s Muse, Lucille.
- Eros. Mythological Greek god of love.
- Mylène Farmer (*b.* 1961, Mylène Jeanne Gautier). Canadian-born French recording artist and songwriter.
- Antony Flew (1923–2010). English philosopher who wrote about the philosophy of religion.
- Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226, Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardino); informally named as Francesco. Italian Roman Catholic friar and preacher. He was canonised in 1228.
- Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis.
- Erich Fromm (1900–1980). German-born psychoanalyst and social philosopher.
- Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). Italian polymath: astronomer, physicist, engineer, philosopher and mathematician.

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- Eligio Stephen Gallegos (*b.* 1934). Psychotherapist and author. A leading expert on the deep imagination and introducing people to their ‘inner animals’.
- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948). Popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi. Pre-eminent leader of the Indian independence movement in British-ruled India.
- Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931). Lebanese-American poet. Author of *The Prophet* (1923), a book of twenty-six prose-poetry fables.
- Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809). Austrian composer, widely regarded as the ‘Father of the Symphony’ and ‘Father of the String Quartet’.
- Hercules. Son of Zeus. Famous in classical mythology for his strength and heroic exploits.
- Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). German, Benedictine abbess, mystic and visionary, writer, composer, philosopher and polymath.
- Julio Iglesias (*b.* 1943). Spanish singer and songwriter. One of the most successful Latin artists of all time.
- John of the Cross (1542–1591). A Spanish mystic; Roman Catholic saint.
- Dr Samuel Johnson (1709–1784). English writer who made lasting contributions to English literature as a poet, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer.
- Julian of Norwich (*c.* 1342–1416). English mystic. The first woman known to have written in English.
- Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology.
- John B. Keane (1928–2002). Irish playwright and novelist.
- John Keats (1795–1821). English Romantic poet.
- Helen Adams Keller (1880–1968). An American author, political activist and lecturer. She was the first deaf-blind person to earn a bachelor of arts degree. She is well known through the play and film *The Miracle Worker*.
- Sr Stanislaus Kennedy (*b.* 1939). Irish nun and author who founded the charity Focus Ireland.
- Brendan Kennelly (*b.* 1936). Irish poet and novelist; former professor of modern English at Trinity College, Dublin.

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- Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Danish philosopher, theologian, poet and religious author. He was the first existentialist philosopher.
- Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936). English journalist, short-story writer, poet and novelist.
- Lao-Tzu (604–531 BC). Ancient Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism.
- C.S. Lewis (1898–1963). British novelist, academic and theologian.
- Abraham A. Low, MD (1891–1954). Path-breaking American neuropsychiatrist.
- Julius Henry Marx (1890–1977). Known as Groucho Marx. American comedian, stage, film and television star.
- Thomas Matthews. Ken's pen name while working at GMIT, so that his students would not know it was his work and therefore be free to comment on it as they wished.
- W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965). British playwright, novelist and short story writer.
- Gerald G. May (1940–2005). American psychiatrist and theologian. Author of *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (2004).
- Anthony de Mello (1931–1987). Indian Jesuit priest, psychotherapist, spiritual teacher, writer and public speaker.
- John Milton (1608–1674). English poet. His biblical epic poem *Paradise Lost*, consisting of over 10,000 lines of verse, was first published in 1667.
- Thomas More (1478–1535). English lawyer, social philosopher, author and statesman. Executed for refusing to acknowledge King Henry VIII as head of the Church of England. He was canonised in 1935.
- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791). Prolific and influential composer of the Classical era.
- John O'Donohue (1956–2008). Irish poet, philosopher, inspirational writer and mystic.
- George Orwell (1905–1950). Pen name of Eric Arthur Blair, an English novelist most famous for *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).
- Alice O'Sullivan, née Tierney (1882–1919). Ken's paternal grandmother.

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- Louis Pasteur (1822–1895). French biologist, microbiologist and chemist, renowned for his discoveries of the principles of vaccination, microbial fermentation and pasteurisation.
- M. Scott Peck (1936–2005). American psychiatrist and author. His best-known book is *The Road Less Travelled* (1978).
- Guadalupe Pineda (*b.* 1955). Mexican singer, who has released thirty albums during her career covering various styles of music and selling more than six million copies.
- Elvis Aaron Presley (1935–1977). American singer and actor, regarded as one of the most significant cultural icons of the twentieth century.
- Giacomo Puccini (1858–1929). Italian opera composer; his most renowned work is *La Bohème*.
- Charles Ringma. Dutch-born author of *Seize the Day with Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A 365 Day Devotional* (2000).
- Sir Ken Robinson (*b.* 1950). A British author, speaker and creativity expert.
- Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919). American statesman, author and reformer who served as twenty-sixth President of the United States.
- Camille Saint Saëns (1835–1921). French composer, organist, conductor and pianist of the Romantic era.
- John E. Sarno (*b.* 1923). American professor of rehabilitation medicine and writer of, among others, *The Divided Mind* (2006).
- Franz Schubert (1797–1828). Austrian composer; highly prolific before his premature death at 31.
- Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832). Scottish historical novelist, playwright and poet.
- William Shakespeare (1564–1616). English poet, playwright and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist.
- Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822). English Romantic poet.
- Socrates (470/469–399 BC). Classical Greek philosopher. One of the founders of Western philosophy.
- Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). British philosopher.
- Sylvester and Tweetie Pie, often just 'Tweetie' (created 1947). Famous Warner Bros. cat and mouse cartoon characters.

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- Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582). Spanish Carmelite nun; writer, reformer and teacher of prayer. She was canonised in 1970.
- Mother Teresa (1910–1997). Albanian-Indian Roman Catholic nun and missionary. She was canonised in 2016.
- Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897). French Carmelite nun; she showed her love of God by making small daily sacrifices rather than undertaking great deeds. She is widely known as ‘The Little Flower’ and was canonised in 1925.
- Thich Nhất Hạnh (*b.* 1926). Vietnamese Buddhist monk; a peace and human rights activist.
- Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). American poet, essayist and philosopher.
- Eckhart Tolle (*b.* 1948, Ulrich Leonard Tölle). German-born resident of Canada, best known as the author of *The Power Of Now* (1997).
- Tanya Tucker (*b.* 1958). American country music artist.
- Vincent Willem van Gogh (1853–1890). Dutch Post-Impressionist painter who is among the most famous and influential figures in the history of Western art.
- Venus. Roman goddess whose functions encompassed love, beauty, desire, sex, fertility, prosperity and victory.
- Evelyn Waugh (1903–1966). English writer of novels, biographies and travel books. He was also a prolific journalist and reviewer of books.
- Mary Webb (1881–1927). English novelist and poet.
- Mary Wesley (1912–2002). English novelist.
- Dame Rebecca West (1892–1983). British author and journalist.
- Walt Whitman (1819–1892). American poet and journalist.
- Oscar Wilde (1854–1900). Irish playwright, novelist, essayist and poet.
- P.G. Wodehouse (1881–1975). English author, lyricist and humorist, best known for his Jeeves and Wooster novels.
- Virginia Woolf (1882–1941). One of the most influential English writers of the twentieth century.
- Zeus. Ruled as king of the gods of Mount Olympus in Ancient Greece. Lucille’s father.

Places

- All Hallows College, Drumcondra, Dublin City. Constituent College of the Dublin City University up to 2016, when it ceased educational activities.
- Ballybunion. Popular seaside resort in County Kerry, Ireland. Ken lived there for eighteen years.
- Bath. City in Bath & North East Somerset, England. Known for its Roman-built baths and its association with novelist Jane Austen.
- Belmullet. Coastal town in County Mayo, Ireland.
- Biggin Hill. An RAF air base in south-east London. Now a general aviation airport.
- Blackrock. Bathing place in Salthill, seaside resort contiguous with Galway City, Ireland.
- Bordeaux. Port city on the Garonne River in the Gironde department in southwestern France.
- Brigit's Garden. Delightful garden with a Celtic theme, open to the public, in Rosscahill, Co. Galway, Ireland.
- Col des Reclus. Imaginary holy place on a mountain pass near imaginary St Jean-de-Valers in the novel *Black on Magenta*.
- Connemara is a rugged but beautiful region in the West of Ireland.
- Downside Abbey and School, Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Somerset, England. Founded in Douai, France in 1605.
- Galway. Regional capital on the Atlantic coast of Ireland. Ken's home city.
- Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), Galway City, Ireland. Technological university where Ken worked for twenty-seven years.
- Holburne Museum. Decorative and fine arts museum in Bath, England.
- Kilmilkin, County Galway, Ireland. Country area where there is a small church which Ken visits when passing.
- Máméan (meaning 'The Pass of the Birds'). A shrine to St Patrick, on a mountain pass in the Maumturk Mountains of Connemara in the West of Ireland.
- Maumturk Mountains. Mountain range in Connemara, West of Ireland. Home to Ken's favourite place, Máméan.

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Mount Olympus. The highest mountain in Greece. It is notable in Greek mythology as the home of the gods.

Portobello Market. The world's largest antiques market, located in the Portobello Road, in the Notting Hill district of London.

Les Reclus. Imaginary remote hamlet in the mountains above St Jean-de-Valers, imaginary village in the Auvergne region of France in Ken's novel *Black On Magenta*.

Renvyle Peninsula is in the Connemara region. It has long stretches of sandy beaches.

Shannon College Of Hotel Management, Shannon Airport, County Clare, Ireland. Ken's first *Alma Mater*.

St Jean-de-Valers. Imaginary village in the Auvergne region of France in the novel *Black on Magenta*.



Bibliography

Privately produced books⁴ by Ken O'Sullivan, from which all the items in *Pieces Of Mind: The Collection* are drawn.

- A-001, 1983 *Toorism – I Think!*
100 howlers from students' examination papers
- A-006, 1998 *Getting The Balance Right – Seminar Handbook*, 3rd edn
Facsimiles of 300 overhead projector slides used in the seminar, with space for notes.
- A-007, 1998 *Getting The Balance Right – Lecturer's Seminar Guide*
50-page guide containing seminar instructions, notes, stories and more.
- A-008, 1998 *Homage To A Future Hero*
First collection of Ken's stories and poems.
- A-011, 1998 *Thomas Matthews: A Selection of Poems and Short Stories*
Ken often used items from his own writings to illustrate points in his lectures in GMIT. He used this pen name so that students would not know that it was he who wrote the pieces, so they could accept, reject or argue without feeling that they might be hurting his feelings.
- A-012, 1998 *Who Do They Think I Am?*
As A-011, but a much larger selection, for friends and others, not specifically students.

⁴ Referenced below by KSBNs – Ken's Standard Book Numbers!

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- A-014, 1999 *Communications – A Course Manual*
Combining two earlier manuals.
- A-015, 2000 *Life With Lucille* (Vols. 1 & 2)
c. 120 stories about Ken's relationship with his gifted, compassionate and beautiful Muse.
- A-017, 2000 *One By One*
Collection of favourite poems and stories
- A-018, 2000 *Fawly Toorism – Millennium Edition*
As *Toorism – I Think!* (A-001) but containing approx. 1400 howlers.
- A-020, 2001 *Grin And Bear It!*
Eclectic collection of poems.
- A-021, 2001 *Save Us From The Well-meaning!*
Eclectic collection of poems.
- A-022, 2001 *Hang On!*
Eclectic collection of poems.
- A-025, 2001 *A Little Of What I Fancy*
Pocket-size edition of favourite poems and stories.
- A-027, 2002 *A Light In The Dark*
A personal treasury of quotations, scriptures, poems and more.
- A-028, 2002 *The Dance Of Forever*
Love poems.
- A-029, 2002 *Just The Job!*
Booklet on job applications, interviews and interviewing.
- A-030, 2002 *The Substance Of Dreams*
Poems on the spiritual journey.
- A-031, 2003 *No Rest For The Wicked*
Eclectic collection of poems.
- A-032, 2003 *Landscape and Lyric*
An illustrated anthology of 17 poems by Ken and 17 landscape paintings by Kieran Tobin.
- A-034, 2003 *From The Cradle Of Eternity*
Poems on the spiritual journey.
- A-035, 2004 *Beyond The Illusion*
Poems on the spiritual journey.
- A-036, 2004 *Love Is The Essence – A Trilogy*
A-030, A-034 and A-035 in one volume, without the illustrations or addenda. Essentially a straightforward readers' edition, whereas the three component volumes are presentation editions.

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- A-038, 2005 *Oh, My Head!*
A (mostly) light-hearted romp through psychology and similar aberrations!
- A-040, 2005 *The Voice Of The Man-child*
Collection of poems, stories and essays for use when reading in public.
- A-041, 2005 *Yearning For The Horizon*
Poems on the spiritual journey.
- A-044, 2006 *Beautiful In Everything*
Poems on the spiritual journey.
- A-045, 2007 *Three Four Five*
Twelve poems: The Máméan Trilogy, The Four Seasons and Five Childhood Flowers.
- A-046, 2007 *Black On Magenta*
Novel. A beautiful and unusual love story.
- A-047, 2007 *Till The Last Day Of Forever*
Poems for and about Thérèse of Lisieux.
- A-049, 2008 *Life With Fred* (Vols. 1 & 2)
Over 110 stories about the volatile, often hilarious, relationship with Ken's inner voice.
- A-050, 2008 *When The Bug Bites*
Poems, stories and essays on writing.
- A-052, 2010 *The Power Of Light*
Poems on the spiritual journey.
- A-053, 2015 *Beyond The Rainbow: Is there a God? What to teach our children?*
Produced primarily for Ken's family. A general version is under consideration.
- A-055, 2015 *Beneath The Surface*, second edition
Essays and stories with a spiritual theme.
- A-056, 2016 *Máméan – A Sacred Place*
Poems and prose about, and photographs of, a favoured spot in the Maumturk Mountains of Connemara, Ireland.
- A-057, 2016 *In My Write Mind*
An eclectic collection of stories and essays.
- A-058, 2016 *Living With The Blues*
About what the title says!
- A-059, 2016 *Overdoing It!*
Eclectic collection of poems.

Pieces Of Mind: The Collection

- A-060, 2017 *Perspectives*, fourth edition
A collection of nearly 600 reflections on (mostly) spiritual themes, plus nearly 60,000 words of additional material.
- A-061, 2017 *Reality And Illusion & Other Essays*
Selection of essays on various topics.
- A-062, 2017 *The Jasmine Touch*
Fairy stories for grown-up children.
- N/A, n.d. *The Dance Goes On*
Draft sequel to the novel *Black On Magenta* (see A-046). Approx. 41,000 words written to date. Ken is not sure if he will complete the book; if not, he may use some of the material as an epilogue to *Black On Magenta*.



No shortage of material

The thought has just struck me that, if you were to use Pieces Of Mind: The Collection as a book of daily reflections and read only one a day, there is sufficient here to keep you going for three years and nine months!