

## Reflections by Brian Brown

Mary Evelyn and John, ever so graciously, invited me here this evening to share the lines which I had originally penned forty years ago this December on the eve of my departure from the Riverdale Center for Religious Research where I had spent the last year, along with John and Valerio Ortolani, working on our respective doctoral dissertations under our director, Thomas Berry.

It had been a privileged experience, and on that night, a moment of the deepest poignancy marked its passing. Valerio, with his study on ecopsychology, had already returned to his Jesuit community in Mexico some months earlier. John, then teaching and concluding his thesis on shamanic healing, had married Mary Evelyn in July, and while they would ever remain the Confucian son and daughter and devoted students to their revered teacher, had nevertheless taken up residence in nearby New Rochelle. And within the week I would be standing in the Cathedral of Old San Juan wedded to my beloved Amarilys Cortijo, herself a student of Thomas Berry who would in fact be flying down to concelebrate the nuptial Mass. So I would be seeing him again in the very near future. Yet, inescapably that December night I was grieved by departure's finality, and the impossibility of expressing my gratitude for this extraordinary thinker who had immeasurably expanded my intellectual and spiritual horizons since my first graced encounter with him as an undergraduate at Fordham eight years earlier. His stature as a scholar and educator was complemented by the abundant warmth of his hospitality, his unstinting generosity of time and interest not just in me, but in the all and the many whom he welcomed into his Riverdale Center by the Hudson that I was then leaving.

The lines which eventually emerged for that farewell gathering of friends and which I here recall, gave expression to the wisdom of its ground floor texts, Thomas Berry's profound and creative engagement with their learning, and his passionate, enduring concern for Earth's gravity and marvel, beyond all their conception:

### **Oh Watchman, What of the Night?**

**Unfinished thesis, finished for the night  
I wander down stairs in this house that has been my home.  
I have known its silence before in a year of nights  
and have haunted its rooms often at this hour of favored quiet.  
But tonight, like an improper Buddhist, I stand warmed  
by the memories of enchanted months, shamelessly, flagrantly moved by their  
passing.**

**The red-tiled entrance, lit for the night,**

reflects now the images of how many departures . . . for the Seychelles and Los Angeles,  
for Toronto and Louisville, for Washington and Greensboro, Detroit and San Francisco.

What enthusiastic journeyings of happy goodbyes!  
The casual corduroy prophet of earth's wisdom and heaven's goodness,  
of passports forgotten, of a bag with only books, of detachment's mirth at the prospect  
of the challenge and the relish of the audacious phrase.

To the left, in the great, dark-wooded room  
the Chinese and Christian fathers sit in their shelves of green and purple,  
exchanging the muted silence of their common mystery.  
A paneled hugeness-it is empty now of its May-time volumes, the scattered lore  
of  
a universe piled deep and wide across its table, awaiting the magic distillation  
that  
would become June's conference.  
And its ceilinged solemnity still pales at the revered Benedictine of a summer's  
eve, impervious to the gentle demands of an immense magnitude, the spirituality  
of starry energies eclipsing the shameful boundaries of so impoverished a  
monasticism.

A few steps beyond, and China and Japan expansively lie before me,  
along their wall of moonlight. While the Hindus and Buddhists are patient in an  
appropriate modesty, sharing shadowy space with myths and symbols, Dante  
and Blake. It is a room of rare texts and of Brittanic knowledge, yet somehow,  
only the antechamber, the passageway to the site of my most attentive  
scholarship,  
my most frequent inspiration, my warmest and most constant laughter.

Multi-glassed prism, reflecting onto rock and river,  
I have known such a gladness in you  
That will warm me in my going and lure me to my return.  
I have sat at your table of frequent polishings and only reticent shines  
through lunches and dinners of quartets and sonatas, concertos  
and symphonies, hearing beyond these-only-partial strains, the  
song of the spheres, the wondrous movements of time's transformations,  
through the voice of earth's sage, my spirit's father, my heart's friend.

Greenhouse porch of my imagination's growth, I have sat dumbly  
for a year like one of your potted plants, content merely to listen with  
geologists and bishops, technicians and planners, contemplatives and artists,  
engineers and scientists, dearest friends and fellow students.

Content to root in my mind's soil  
the vision and the challenge, the perspective and the approach,

to be schooled in the responsibility and energized by the tireless dedication.  
Though you have been a room of the most sublime idea and critical thought,  
of the most sober evaluation and urgent quest,  
I shall stand in the breeze of the Caribbean night  
still smiling with the constant laughter of your year's grace.

The sky is pale with moon and stars, and as I turn to go,  
instinctively I hear the question of night's sentinel, holding its branches  
protectively  
for this house that has been my home. A question posed nightly as I stood for a  
year  
and shared its rooted stillness, before sleep,

"Oh watchman, what of the night?"

A time of memories and their tears,  
of ideals and enthusiasms,  
of deepest admiration and warmest gratitude,  
of affectionate welcomes,  
and happy goodbyes.