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'I will go into a church when it is empty'

Jeremy Clarke
poet

I've always written. But about 15 or so years ago I decided simply to be brave enough to commit myself, thoroughly and properly, to it, whatever the cost, as it were. There's a fine line between bravery and insanity, I believe.

My most recent book publication is *Devon Hymns* — a record of my time spent on a Devon dairy farm some years ago. I'd left London with the vague idea that a bit of quietness might facilitate some creative thought. The book was one of the things that came out of that time.

Much of my other work is rather urban. I'm interested in what I feel most people dismiss, disregard. There are countless moments of eye-watering beauty in the simplest of urban realities. Stand on any patch of pavement, and you'll see and hear it. It is happening underneath what we normally register. In the smallest details.

"I'm a perfect stranger/passing through the commonplace, amazed." If there's anything that I hope might happen through my writing, it is that people might walk through this world in that way, almost with a sense of awe, which certainly in an urban context gets lost. Partly because we're inundated with so much wow factor technology, the lights, bells and whistles of the urban experience, we have to constantly make choices as to what to attend to and ignore. Attention spans get necessarily shorter. The small details of life begin to be dishonoured.

I'm looking down right now, and in the street I see a flashing light of a zebra crossing, and that's a simple thing. If a child looked at that, it would stand amazed for some time, till it was tugged away by its mother saying, "Come on: we've got to do something else." It's not immaturity, it's awe and wonder that we're born with, that we eventually have educated out of us.

If you walk in the world as a perfect stranger, as a child does, everything is worthy of attention, is examined, considered, picked up, put down. If we walked through the world in this way, it would change everything.

I see God's creativity in every single moment in human interaction, at the lowest levels that people often don't consider or think of as creative, of bringing something into being — a half-smile between strangers, a dog looking up into its owner's eyes, the slow fall of a leaf, a breeze stirring a puddle, all randomly occurring, generally dismissed. It's that creativity that I'm trying to express all the time, and point to as worthy of our consideration.

I live in central London. At times, the relentless energy of the city can be challenging, and lead to sensory overload. Perhaps that's why I'm a night owl. Night is when the city boils down to a level of freneticism one can just about relate to.

I'm not sure where my sense of obligation to write comes from. Finding a reason for a particular compulsion is never straightforward. I believe that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. It's enough to simply know that.

What makes it worth it? Finding that something you have done has been a blessing. In whatever way or ways.

Paying the bills is always difficult! I need acres of time to think and produce work (ideas too big, brain too small); so I simply can't do too much other work without being diluted and delayed in what I'm trying to achieve. I work a few hours in a second-hand bookshop, which makes a dent in the rent.

And I'm about to add a little something else: poet-in-residence at Eton. I'm not a teacher, but rather will be hoping that my one small example of a way of working, of paying attention, might offer something to interested boys in pursuit of their own individual voice. We will learn from each other. I'm looking forward to it.

Blake thought education had a lot to answer for in making us grow up, learn to run businesses, have families, rule the world. Well, we do need to grow up — doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible "Now I have put away childish things"? But it's vital to retain an openness to things. All artists walk through the world in this way.

I think it would make the world a gentler place if we all did so. If you're honouring everything, whether it's a leaf in flight or the flashing light at a zebra crossing, you can't help but have an empathy for the person beside you, whether you know them or not.

I've just published a long piece in the journal *Artesian* called "Walking In Beauty". It's about a street sweeper walking through his day shift and then a night shift. He is himself unnoticed and disregarded, and yet sees, hears, and understand every single thing. For me, the street sweeper is a kind of reference image of how to proceed through the world. If we walked through the world in that ground-level way, paying that kind of close attention, it would change everything, make us more worshipful, appreciative, more acknowledging of each other, and of God.

When I talk about my search for truth, I suppose it is linked to the search for beauty. But beauty is so threaded through the ordinary one is tripping over it at every turn.

I have a rather simplistic way of walking through the world as a Christian. I rarely attend formal church services. I will go into a church when it is empty. I very much like being "attached" to a church, and having a spiritual guide (I have both at St Pancras Old Church, London). I regard that kind of home base vital.

I consider my working to be prayer, and what I produce to be an extension of my faith. I think I have invented a new kind of urban monasticism. . . It's important that I maintain a connection to a particular church: a rootedness in an otherwise unrooted life. And this great sense of peace I feel when I walk in to that place, or any church — a traditional church — if empty and alone. I feel that I have come back, in that particular moment — this small homecoming. Then you go out, leave home, carry on.

The most important choice I have made? Well, the one where I decided to embrace poverty, obscurity, loneliness, and rejection by deciding to



write full time [laughs]. And regrets? I have no regrets about making that choice, of course. I regret the loss of certain people — some through faults and weaknesses of mine. But, in the end, it's difficult to have regrets. What I've been through has led me to here: to what I am, to what I've produced, to where I'm growing. Whatever the journey you're on is, it's the right one.

Posthumous fame would be lovely: I hope I get to enjoy it. It would please me to think that one or two pieces of mine might continue to resonate and have meaning and relevance to a few

others in the future — if people could walk through the world in this way.

Tutelary or kindred spirits? Milton, Van Gogh, John Berger, Emily Young. They are mentors and guides and quiet supports, both for what they have done, and the way in which they have gone about doing it. Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* when he was 68 and completely blind. I'm on my knees.

I don't have a favourite place. Having one would mean having to tell everywhere else: "Just so you know, you're not my favourite." Awful. I tend to

THE question most asked if you live in a funny old house in the middle of nowhere is: "Do you see ghosts?" No; but now and then I hear mothers calling "Get up!" They stand at the bottom of the clumsy stairs, or the wonky ladder to the attic, threatening sleepy sons with dire consequences if they do not appear before they count ten. Feed the pigs. Go to school. What would their father say? Half-past five and still abed.

But at least these centuries of farmers' boys would not likely have put their parents down on paper. Many writers do, one way or another. Dickens immortalised — and forgave — his father in Mr Micawber. Edmund Gosse, an only son, in his masterpiece *Father and Son*, revealed how far one could go in not giving hurt to a parent.

Poor Mr Gosse senr. was a Creationist, and also a great scientist. Genesis told him one thing, the rocks, another. He and his fellow religionists once stood on the shore to await the Second Coming. One day Edmund told him that he did not believe a word of all this. Love continued between them, but something terrible, as well. It was not the usual row — literature saw to that. But what a fate, to breed an author!

The poet John Clare had to break it to his parents gently that he had written what he read to them because his mother "knew not a single letter, and superstition went so far with her that she believed the higher parts of learning was the blackest arts of witchcraft." Oh, the shame of it, to have a writer for a son! Or a daughter, of course. And, oh, the risk of it!

My friend Edward Blishen was able to take the risk. Love made it



word from Wormingford

Ronald Blythe reflects on authors who write about their parents

possible for him. "Hate could be equally rewarding." The plain truth was that his mother, Lizzie Pye, a servant girl and all unknowingly a great woman, was irresistible copy.

On the whole, writers find fathers easier to expose than they do mothers; not that exposure is necessarily a driving force — only the morality of telling the truth. To tell the truth about Mother, one had to cut into oneself as well as into her.

Edward and Lizzie seem to have been unflinching in this all their lives, which is not usually the case. But she had to grow old before he could, at least, show her to others as unsparingly as, since his boyhood,

move a lot: 13 times in 17 years. I love to be able to look and listen and learn in a different street, engage and adapt to new circumstances, difficulties, differences. It all goes in, and changes you. And sometimes it comes out, on the page.

My favourite part of the Bible is the Psalms. Well, it's the only part I read, really. I'm sure that makes me a pretty useless Christian. I take some consolation from the fact that Jesus read them. And that monastic traditions use them as a focus of their worship. Whittle it down further? Psalm 1. It's like having one poem. How many do you need?

When did I last get angry? Goodness, what time is it now? I get angry all the tedious time. Usually at myself, and quite often at uncooperative inanimate objects. They have their sly way of provoking you.

I'm happiest when I've just put down on the page — after weeks and pages of workings out — a line that finally seems to work. I'm unhappiest immediately afterwards, when the newly blank brain says, "Yes, fine, fine. Now what?"

I don't actually pray for anything; I usually just give thanks. Quietly, rather too quickly, perhaps. I pray the Jesus Prayer often; and the Lord's Prayer.

Locked in a church with someone? Well, it would have to be Jesus, wouldn't it? If only because I'd like to know if I was on the right track (or, indeed, travelling in the right direction). If he paused before answering, I would immediately know that, up till then, I'd been slightly missing the point.

Jeremy Clarke was talking to Terence Handley MacMath.
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she had shown herself to him. For such a passionate writer, it was a long wait. Both he and his mother were touchers to the end — embracing, holding hands, giving little kisses: a warming existence. And this helped.

Inciness can be equally productive. Think of Ivy Compton-Burnett's *Mother and Son*. Yet there is a kind of natural avoidance, to the extent of caricature, in putting parents on the page. Once, Jesus shockingly rebuffed his mother — "Woman, what have I to do with you?" The clinging nature of Jewish mothers?

With writers, of course, there is the painful nature of all ties, and their exploration, the putting them into words, and the breaking of taboos, the flight from them, and the inescapable tentacles of them, which the playwright Dodie Smith called *Dear Octopus*. Thus, from afar, in rooms where parents and children have insisted on dependence and independence for many generations, I might catch a cry or two. Although, of course, it might be the white cat.

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