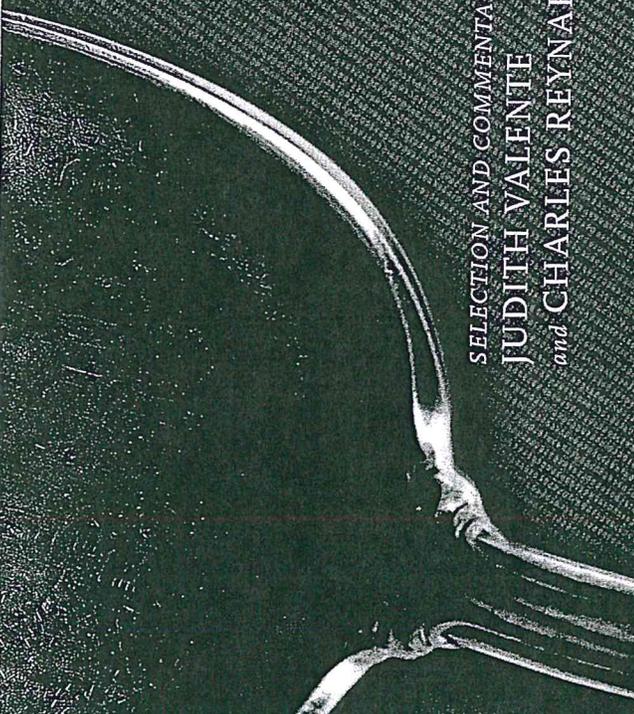


TWENTY POEMS  
*to*  
NOURISH YOUR SOUL

SELECTION AND COMMENTARY BY  
JUDITH VALENTE  
and CHARLES REYNARD



## THE GOD WHO LOVES YOU

*Carl Dennis*

It must be troubling for the god who loves you  
To ponder how much happier you'd be today  
Had you been able to glimpse your many futures.  
It must be painful for him to watch you on Friday evenings  
Driving home from the office, content with your week—  
Three fine houses sold to deserving families—  
Knowing as he does exactly what would have happened  
Had you gone to your second choice for college,  
Knowing the roommate you'd have been allotted  
Whose ardent opinions on painting and music  
Would have kindled in you a lifelong passion.  
A life thirty points above the life you're living  
On any scale of satisfaction. And every point  
A thorn in the side of the god who loves you.  
You don't want that, a large-souled man like you  
Who tries to withhold from your wife the day's disappointments  
So she can save her empathy for the children.  
And would you want this god to compare your wife  
With the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus?  
It hurts you to think of him ranking the conversation  
You'd have enjoyed over there higher in insight  
Than the conversation you're used to.  
And think how this loving god would feel  
Knowing that the man next in line for your wife  
Would have pleased her more than you ever will  
Even on your best days, when you really try.

Can you sleep at night believing a god like that  
 Is pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives  
 You're spared by ignorance? The difference between what is  
 And what could have been will remain alive for him  
 Even after you cease existing, after you catch a chill  
 Running out in the snow for the morning paper,  
 Losing eleven years that the god who loves you  
 Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene  
 Unless you come to the rescue by imagining him  
 No wiser than you are, no god at all, only a friend  
 No closer than the actual friend you made at college,  
 The one you haven't written in months. Sit down tonight  
 And write him about the life you can talk about  
 With a claim to authority, the life you've witnessed,  
 Which for all you know is the life you've chosen.

## GOD IS THE PLOT CR

JUDY AND I HAVE enjoyed many a spirited discussion over our beliefs. Carl Dennis's poem *The God Who Loves You* has sparked some of the most lively of those discussions. Judy was born and raised as a traditional Catholic, while I wasn't baptized until age seven, and then only because a new best friend in a new neighborhood attended St. Joan of Arc parochial school, and I wanted to be like him. (I'm only half joking when I call Catholicism the religion of friendship.) My struggles with Catholic doctrine and with a range of faith issues began not too many years after the rather secular origin of my conversion.

*The God Who Loves You* zooms in on one of my more enduring struggles: if God plays an ongoing role in creation, how do we reconcile those parts of our lives and our world that are messy, flawed, unjust, even tragic? How do we come around to acceptance of our world and of ourselves?

Those questions challenge our traditional image of God. We often envision God as a chess master, moving humans around like so many rooks and pawns on a board. Or, we imagine God as a kind of professional advance man who runs around pulling together meetings and events, causing people

to meet, or not. All we mere mortals have to do is show up for life. The rest is taken care of.

Here in the Western world, we have developed a photographic image of God. Though God never sat for portraiture as far as we can tell, we just *know* he's a lot like the white-haired man with the long beard in Michelangelo's painting, extending his finger outward to infuse Adam with life. Holding to that image, it's easy to give God all the credit when things go right. But what are we to think when we receive news of that devastating diagnosis, when we lose a job unfairly through a layoff, or when we suffer the sudden loss of a loved one?

As a journalist, Judy once interviewed people of faith whose relatives died in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. How had they coped with the tragedy? How had it affected their faith? Could they find it in their hearts to forgive the bomber? One woman, whose husband was killed, recounted an interesting story. The father of one young woman credited his daughter's survival in the attack to the fact that he prayed for her every morning right around the time she reported to work. The woman who'd lost her husband tearfully asked Judy: "Did that mean the people whose loved ones had died didn't pray for them, or didn't pray hard enough?"

One evening a few days before Thanksgiving, a neighbor of ours stood in our kitchen and related to us how he had lost his faith in God. He said that when he was quite small, his father developed cancer. "My brother and I were told to pray for my father so he would get better. But he died. I stopped believing in God that very day." What could we say to him? There isn't an easy answer for why his prayers weren't answered, why his

young father had to suffer cancer in the first place. This may strike against the grain of what so many believe, but I don't think of God as a producer, director, orchestrator, or even as a stage manager. I do believe that God is present. God is there in the unfolding plot.

The God in Carl Dennis's poem isn't some grand puppeteer. In Dennis's world, we are not so much at the mercy of God's detailed plan for us as we are the victims or benefactors of our individual choices. This is a God who frets over the other lives we might have lived had we chosen them. What if we had gone away to college and not stayed home? What if we had chosen a different spouse, the one we would have met had we gone to that other college? Dennis's God even calculates how many years we shaved off our life expectancy by our own stupidity, like running out in the snow without a coat to fetch the morning paper.

Within the poem is another struggle, the one for self-acceptance. I have waged that battle my entire life. Without saying so directly, Dennis challenges us to accept the divine within—literally infused with the life we've "witnessed," as he puts it, the life we've been given. The poem reminds me that as long as I regard God as outside of me, I am destined to wonder endlessly about my own worthiness, my own guilt. I am fated to question whether, with a little more fidelity, skill, or luck, with a little more time to bargain, I might have become more acceptable, more lovable, more worthy. But if I recognize that God is in me and in others, rather than separate and apart, how can I not then accept myself, my life, and others as they are?

The poem also reminds me that each day I am creating my life by the choices I make. In that sense, I bear a sobering responsibility. I suspect that some of us prefer the notion of God as CEO, the big guy in the front office who calls the shots. We might even find that image comforting. I like what the philosopher and writer Miguel de Unamuno once said about belief: "Those who believe that they believe in God, but without passion in their hearts, without anguish in mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair, can in their consolation believe only in the God idea, not God himself." By owning our responsibility, we actually become more free, not less. I am now more conscious of the choices I make. I try to think of their consequences *before* I act. This is not to say that prayer is futile, or that it's inappropriate to ask for God's guidance. But to me, there is a difference between seeking a particular outcome from God, and what I like to think of as leaning into the mystery of life, letting life unfold. What transpires ultimately may be the outcome we sought. It may be much different, or perhaps much better. We just might find that the life we know is the life we would have chosen.

## TO THE MISTAKES

W. S. Merwin

You are the ones who  
 were not recognized  
 in time although you  
 may have been waiting  
 in full sight in broad  
 day from the first step  
 that set out toward you  
 and although you may  
 have been prophesied  
 hung round with warnings  
 had your big pictures  
 in all the papers  
 yet in the flesh you  
 did not look like that  
 each of you in turn  
 seemed like no one else  
 you are the ones who  
 are really my own  
 never will leave me  
 forever after  
 or ever belong  
 to anyone else  
 you are the ones  
 I must have needed  
 the ones who led me

in spite of all that  
 was said about you  
 placing my footsteps  
 on the only way

## PAZIENZA

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W. S. MERWIN OFTEN addresses himself to unusual listeners in his poems: *To the Light of September*, *To the Fire*, *To a Few Cherries*, *To Prose*, and *To the Dust of the Road*. In this poem, he speaks to his mistakes. Perhaps it is only Merwin's imagined narrator speaking. I prefer to think it is the poet himself, who rises in humility to the challenge of accepting himself.

There is, in Merwin's poem, a connection to Carl Dennis's *The God Who Loves You*. Dennis invites his readers to embrace their status with grace, and to shed the burden of second-guessing the narrative twists of their lives. Dennis asks us to accept our choices. Merwin drives the logic of this challenge even further. He dares us to accept our mistakes. Ordinarily, we regard our mistakes as bad, as meriting regret. Merwin believes they are as integral to our lives as our successes. They are essential parts of ourselves. They "are the ones who / are really my own / never will leave me / forever after / or ever belong / to anyone else."

I don't believe Merwin is talking about the difficult or traumatic events that can befall any human being—an accident, an illness, or a layoff. He is talking about the mistakes we provoke. He points out something so true: our mistakes

often stare us right in the face before we make them, though we are too dim to notice. They “may have been waiting / in full sight in broad / day from the first step / that set out toward you.” These are the errors and bad judgments that make us feel stupid and worthless. Merwin realizes that many of his mistakes didn’t materialize out of thin air. Some of them were “hung round with warnings / had [their] big pictures / in all the papers.” They are the mistakes that, depending on the consequences, leave permanent, exquisitely sensitive scars upon us, and probably upon others as well.

The poet proposes a difficult exercise: to confront the truly serious mistakes that have marked us in profound ways. It is not emotionally convenient to think about these mistakes, much less to own them. But only by doing so, Merwin seems to be saying, can we feel the first stirrings of wisdom. While you are summoning the courage to do this exercise (out loud, if at all possible, and to someone else, maybe a very particular someone else), I will recount one of my biggest mistakes and most bitter humiliation—the kind that produced “big pictures / in all the papers.”

On November 16, 1995, I had been state’s attorney, the chief prosecuting authority and legal officer of McLean County, Illinois, for just under nine years. I was in the first month of a heated reelection campaign. I was fifty years old, a husband for twenty-seven years, the father of two daughters, and a twenty-year political veteran. I had worked on numerous campaigns, including three of my own.

One evening my thirty-two-year-old challenger and I engaged in a debate before the Bloomington, Illinois, police

union. My opponent referred to my job performance as “garbage.” I called him “clueless.” On the way out of the building after the debate, I told him he should get his facts straight next time. It was the last nonprofane sentence either of us said. Side-by-side, we walked out the door exchanging epithets of escalating anger, crossing the street to where I had parked my car. I got in on the driver’s side. He stepped toward the car door, probably wanting the last word as much as I did. Then he shoved his hand against my shoulder.

I went off like a firecracker. I leapt from my seated position and started swinging. We scuffled with each other back across the street. I missed every punch I threw (though he later disputed this). However, I did manage to kick him squarely in the groin. The fight was over. I noticed there were several people at the end of the block. A police detective was leaving the building where my opponent and I had debated. In an instant, the heat of my anger yielded to a flood of embarrassment.

My opponent claimed I had attacked him. The detective quickly directed all of us, witnesses included, to the police department. My opponent initially indicated that he wanted no further action taken, but after consulting with his advisors, he told the police he wanted charges filed against me. He claimed he never touched me; that he had not come within even six feet of my car; and that I, unprovoked, had attacked him in the middle of the street.

After the police took our statements, I was released and went home. I had to tell my wife that I had been in a street fight, that the police were investigating the matter, and that

charges might be filed. It was also necessary to tell my daughters—one by telephone (she was away in college) and the other in person—that their *father* might be accused of a crime. A crime-scene technician came to my home at 2:00 a.m. and examined my car for fingerprints.

The following morning, a story appeared in the local newspaper. I gave an impromptu news conference that day in which I acknowledged the embarrassment of what had occurred and gave my version of the events, which was significantly different from that of my opponent. My picture was taken and appeared in the following morning's paper. It depicted me, quite accurately, as an exhausted and bewildered person, burdened by shame. Because I was an officer of the court in that district, the chief of police requested that a special prosecutor investigate whether felony charges of aggravated battery on a public way should be filed against me or my opponent (though I had not pressed charges against him).

Both of us street warriors took polygraph examinations. The editorial board of the local newspaper called on me to step down from office during the investigation and to resign if I was charged. There was a constant swirl of criticism as well as many expressions of empathy and support. The special prosecutor worked through Thanksgiving and Christmas to resolve the matter. It was not until New Year's Eve that he filed his report to the chief judge. The special prosecutor declined to file charges against either of us. He did, however, note in his public report that I and my opponent, both of us attorneys, had brought disrepute upon ourselves and the legal profession. The community deserved better. However, there is no

escaping one simple fact: my participation in this incident was entirely my *responsibility*.

The incident affected not just my public image, but caused me to feel diminished within my family. My wife and daughters, as if they did not already know it, now had living, breathing proof of my imperfections, including, but not limited to, my raging problems of pride and anger. Only over time did I begin to recognize this mistake for what it was: a startling wake-up call. As Merwin says of his mistakes, "you are the ones / I must have needed / the ones who led me / in spite of all that / was said about you / placing my footsteps / on the only way." These were mistakes, perhaps defects in character, that had existed long before this incident and likely "never will leave me / forever after." But I learned a great deal about myself from this incident. I learned that I had to accept these parts of myself before I could meaningfully respond to the challenge of changing them.

After the flurry of publicity began to die down, many friends told me not to worry, to forget about the embarrassment I had experienced. My wife and my daughters said they forgave me. But the traditional connection between forgiving and forgetting, as the old saying goes, suddenly didn't seem so clear to me.

Is it wise to forgive *and* forget? The logic of the aphorism is that by the act of forgiveness, we can forget about the pain we have suffered and not give our grievances opportunity to fester and grow. This logic may prove compelling when we are forgiving others, but I don't think it is very useful when we respond to the burdens of our own mistakes, when we try

to forgive ourselves. Forgetting our mistakes diminishes our capacity to correct them. Yet Merwin seems to be saying that our mistakes are *parts* of ourselves, in need of acceptance and integration. His counterintuitive wisdom is that mistakes are our own, they won't simply leave us. They are not to be forgotten or foisted on anyone else. We need them. They lead us.

Merwin's poem is not expressly theological. But for me, it reaches into the heart of divine mercy. Recognition and acceptance of my own mistakes are essential to forgiveness of myself, which is, I believe, the most powerful form of forgiveness. Until I recognize my mistakes I can't really understand my need for forgiveness. And until I experience God's forgiveness I am hardly capable of expressing forgiveness to myself or anyone else. After we have experienced forgiveness, we begin to learn what it feels like to be whole, to have been touched by the divine. Before this experience of brokenness and healing, I did not know that brokenness is more meaningful when shared with others rather than hidden from them.

For me, this is an ongoing work; it is most certainly incomplete. I have made many mistakes before and since the 1996 campaign. I have had the privilege of making numerous mistakes on the front page of the newspaper. These were devastating events, enormously embarrassing to my family and me. However, the more private mistakes have been no less soul shaking, including the ones leading to the dissolution of my marriage and the profound trauma experienced by my daughters. But I now consider my mistakes as alarms, unspeakably difficult, yet necessary steps to becoming more aware and alive.

Several years ago I discovered the Italian word for patience, *pazienza*. It resonated because of my recognition that pride, anger, and *impatience*, the kind I exhibited with my opponent that fateful night, have been constant companions on my journey. They are partners in virtually all my self-destructive enterprises. I examined the word and looked it up in a dictionary I had received during a trip to Italy the year following my campaign. For the first time, I realized the root of this word comes from *pax* or *pacem*, Latin for peace. Within patience, there is peace. So simple, yet so startling. I don't believe I would have gained this insight had I not recognized and finally accepted my own impatience as an integral part of me. I don't always have to give in to this impatience, but I do have to recognize it as part of what makes me tick. As Merwin suggests at the end of his poem, our flaws and mistakes lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves and life—"placing [our] footsteps / on the only way."