

DOCUMENTS

Two Essays by Margaret Avison

For the short essay, "I Wish I Had Known...that I couldn't have my cake and eat it," Avison used the pseudonym Angela Martin. The Scripture Union Press first published the collection to which it was contributed in 1968 in England; The Zondervan Publishing House in Grand Rapids, Michigan, reprinted the book in 1970. The subtitle of *I Wish I Had Known...* is "Thirteen Christians describe misunderstandings they had about the Christian way of life." It is not clear how Avison came to be invited to contribute to this collection, but the result is an uncharacteristically frank description of her childhood and of her battle with anorexia.

As her time teaching at Scarborough College drew to a close in 1968, Avison joined the editorial board of *CRUX*, the publication of the Graduate Christian Fellowship at the University of Toronto. Avison had already published poems and short essays in *CRUX* by this time, and this appointment meant that she would be encouraged to publish the occasional piece when a compelling subject presented itself to her. She evidently felt she should witness in print and speak to other Christians on concerns they might share in a forum they did share. The second essay, "...At Least We Are Together," was published in *CRUX* 8 (1970-71): 15-19, after Avison had begun working at Evangel Hall. Her profound empathy with the dispossessed and those on the margins of society is clear in this meditation on the complex issue of urban poverty.

These essays are reprinted with the permission of Joan Eichner, literary executor for Margaret Avison.

**"I wish I had known that . . . I couldn't have my cake and eat it."
by Angela Martin**

Joining the church gave me a sense of awe and a large, clear-as-a-colorless-raindrop Will To Be Good. When I was about twelve years old, I remember trotting along after school to read – a good child's reading aloud – to a blind woman living out her last years alone. She wore black dresses, lived in a little house that smelled of dried geraniums, and kept all the blinds drawn, always. This woman would play me "The Raindrop Prelude," her fingers all bone on the piano ivories. And she sometimes talked to me – deliberate "witnessing" it was, as I know now. She told me about a teacher who taught her to read star maps when she was about my age; she

always added that "he understood the human heart." And a true sense of God, in the black depths of the heavens swept with star design, and in the throbbing, red, pulpy, human heart he "understood," certainly came through to me after a fashion.

She also told me about her son, Chauncy, who had died of scarlet fever when he was only five. The experience was still vivid with pain for this tiny, wrinkled person, now more than four score and ten years, far beyond the event that was so present to her. But Chauncy was a child of God, she told me, a rarely gifted little boy. He came in slowly one day with tears in his eyes. And when she held him and asked what was wrong, she said he had replied, "Oh, Mummy, it's the sin in my little heart." So that before he came to that fever time and died, "God already had him," she said. I winced in every fiber every time scarlet fever and sin were mentioned, like silicates, powdering off in a diminishing-past-vanishing-point version of that other story, the large, crimson, live heart on the velvet, night sky, to which I responded gladly every time.

This friendship, in time, withered: perhaps because it ceased to serve its purpose for me, as I saw that purpose. I had been impressed by a sermon on the necessity of "secrecy in almsgiving." It seemed that it would be "good" to give afternoon time to this "neighbor." But if anybody caught on and gave me the credit, they would be cutting me out of the true reward for which I was angling. Hence, I evaded questions at home about my lateness getting home from school; my anxious parents pressed the questions and finally I burst out with the explanation. But I complained and lamented loudly that it was no use now, no good any more – now that my secret was exposed; the "goodness" I'd been seeking had evaporated! It was particularly wry because I really enjoyed many of those afternoons and missed them.

Yes, I liked the idea of being good, but also I liked being aware of every kind of going on. I "tasted" what it would have been like if I'd been born, not in a minister's family, but in a jolly Finnish household where I had supper sometimes with a school friend. Or if I'd been born the hard-bitten boy in the seat ahead of mine at school who had stolen rides in freight trains alongside the transient laborers, from prairie harvesting to California fruit-picking and all the way back up to the Atlantic seaports. He told me tales about "riding the rods" this way with "that old sot," his dad. The good part of experience – the God part – I accepted as part of *my* family furnishings, as the copper kettle belonged to my Finnish friend's ritual home life, and as the life inside the maps the rest of us "took in geography" was part of my elderly friend's reality.

I am thankful that my parents trusted us at large in the varied areas where my father's pastorates let us live. They did not define any area as "outside" for us. They both had deep aversions to hellfire and hate preaching. And they had no idea that the polarization of knowing Christ personally never occurred to me. To them it was the basis of meaningfulness to confess Jesus as the Christ of God. My father's favorite hymn was "None Other Lamb," and I spent countless hours with my mother, both of us lost in Good Friday music. I think that her strong faith was the spell that held me listening far past my usual concentration span at that age. Naturally, I am not in a position to judge the forces that shaped my parents' views, or even to define these views as distinct from my many-clouded impressions of them. My mother and father taught us to read the Bible, to pray, to love, to enjoy. As I gathered from them, obeying was the flowering action of love – and I quickly used this emphasis to duck any specific points of obedience. I persuaded myself that being loved, somehow, meant being allowed guarantees from God: whatever I wanted was all right, or would be fixed up in the long run!

I wish I had known that nobody is remote from God – or (to put it the other way round) that I was not somehow peculiarly close to all good simply by virtue of having grown up a much loved youngster in a relatively protected world.

I wish I had known that music, libraries, and winter mornings burning with cold beauty are the gifts God lavishes, and that these things fade if not acknowledged. I deluded myself that whatever I enjoyed was the blurry but adequate portrait of "God." Since I preferred to hang on to "being good," I was glad to "see God everywhere," but with comparative and comforting indistinctness. I read the Bible less, and gradually not at all, for myself. And in due course I was ready to agree with my wise and tolerant friends that Jesus was about the best person who ever lived, and that most people that talked about Him today . . . well, if He moved in on the scene here and now, He'd be on "our" side, and "they" wouldn't put up with Him any more than they did with us! But Paul, we said learnedly, Paul twisted it up into formulas and spoiled it.

I wish I had known that there was a reason why the Bible became to me more and more opaque (garbled, I called it, in the Gospels particularly). I wish I had known that the reason was that I was increasingly substituting an invented person of my own designing for Jesus, the Word made flesh, the life of the Word of God.

I was going to say I wish I had known that one day – January 4th, 1963, to be exact – the Jesus of resurrection power would speak to me very qui-

etly when I was, as I thought, alone, and would risk Himself once again to bring me out, in time, from my death. But it would not be fully honest to say it, unless foreknowing had hastened the hour. What I mean is, I would not want to have missed what He gave then: the astounding delight of His making Himself known at last, sovereign, forgiving, forceful for life.

I wish I had known that Jesus explicitly answered that urgent question, "Lord, how is it that You will manifest Yourself to us and not to the world?" And that His answer hinged on the component of obedience in Christian love.

I wish I had known that although thinking, comprehending, understanding, probing, are good – faculties God gave to us human beings – yet these faculties are given so that we can come to some notion of His unapproachably beautiful thinking, comprehending, understanding, and probing, even of me, my feelings and contacts and plans and responses to situations and openings from moment to moment in history (a history which, too, He comprehends).

Between the first period I have described above (with the child's reading aloud) and the second (when I "thought for myself"), between my early adolescence and early adulthood, came two severe experiences: illness and, in the city district where we moved, inescapably, the Depression. The illness was partly self-induced by deliberate starvation. There is a medical term for the aberration which is not uncommon among young people. Three years of treatment brought full physical recovery. It took longer for me to realize that I clung so to my version of myself being "good" that I imposed a split between the false image and the actual one – and tried to live as the specter! The economic Depression of the 1930's set the scene for this struggle, and yet it forcibly reminded me of other people's troubles too.

In this period, I still wanted to be good and took it on to do that thing along with my secondary school geometry, when I first knew people who knew real hunger, real want. Then I began to walk, for hours: city walks that bared the truly grim time this was for many. I saw solitary, frayed, bony men staring in bake-shop windows, standing out in the dirty snow. Everything was dirty snow at that time for me. I thought the answer was easy: give all we had away at once, and it would be all daffodils tomorrow. Wasn't that "what it said"? "If it doesn't mean that, why not chuck the lot?" (My poor parents had troubles enough to cope with, without my noble stance and complete blindness to the reality of grinding budgets!)

I stopped eating; I stopped enjoying. I wanted to be lost with the stunted frail creatures, with wrists like sticks out of raveled sweater cuffs, whom I

walked and walked among on the dirty streets around the idle, empty mills and railroad tracks. I wish I had known that Jesus really did become one with them, with me, too. And that nobody else needs to do it; nobody can do it any more than we can be good. We can be with Him, beyond His Cross, because we come to Him there to accept the exchanged lots, our death for His life. And then there is a way of getting to be where His suffering goes – but this I only begin to glimpse. If He takes us to Himself, it is joy: that I do know. And He says that when He takes us, we will be "with Me where I am." That was on the way to Gethsemane.

And yet, do I? I see how grievously I cut off His way by honoring the artist: the sovereignty of God was the real issue for a long time, for me. Of course I rue the years when I confused conscience with adapting to what certain approved people expected of me. I wanted to be liked, and on the basis of "genuine merit" too! In the arts I had my touchstone for scope and vividness – and poetry seemed to promise aliveness too. But this orientation allowed me to neglect or distance some real elements of humanness as alien to my own sense of what mattered. In questions of behavior, too, my priorities were confused. A social gaffe could make me burn with shame upon every remembrance. Yet on ethical issues, I tended to generalize.

I felt increasingly hesitant to accept any person's sense of the good – my own or that of people from different backgrounds with different temperaments. The drastic step of individual action, of wholehearted and singular choosing, became impossible. One had to try to serve the general interest – stuffing envelopes in some chilly committee room on into the evening, or working up copy for leaflets and mimeographed magazines. Gradually, a malaise, a false peace, settled in. Persons, events, and my own responses grew more and more indeterminate, lost the bite of uniqueness. I was going down into living death. The way has seemed to me hideously time-wasting. But the lagging and preening and deriding He forgets. His forgiving, strengthening, renewing love opens a future, even now. He will use even the long willful detour into darkness: I trust Him (at this moment I can say it) with my long failure to *know*. In the touch of His hands it can be transmuted, His way, whether or not I understand or even know. Bit by bit, then, the ways I hinder Him now will be lightened by His mercy, His grace, and I probably will again and again look around wonderingly, able to say afresh, "I wish I had known"