

Chapter 5 Excerpt
WRITING FOR THE SUPREME EDITOR
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THE JOY OF PSALMING

What is a Psalm?

Poetry has been such a part of my writing life that I want to devote a separate chapter to express my reason for writing poetry and what is involved in the process of versification. The trusty dictionary defines a psalm as a sacred song, hymn, or poem often set to music. The Scriptures encourage us to “teach and admonish one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in our hearts to God” (Ephesians 3:16). By inference, since we no longer have the original music to accompany the biblical psalms, we are free to set them to music or chant in our generation.

If you open your Bible to its middle pages, you are looking at the Hebrew *Book of Psalms*. It is actually a hymnal of lyrics without the music. David, the famous king of Israel, composed most of the song/poems along with some other noted folks like music directors and choir leaders of his day. These are not rhymed and metered compositions. They are distinctly Hebrew poetry style which expresses ideas in parallel phrases. The writers of the Psalms make generous use of similes and metaphors and figurative language. The Psalms in the Bible are not thought of as a theological treatise or meant to convey heretofore unknown divine revelation. Psalms rather amplify, embellish, and express personal and community spiritual experience and worship. Hebrew Psalms have turned out to be timeless.

I don't write King David's kind of psalms/poems either, but I'm still a psalmist by definition. I don't write greeting card verse, or the Shelley or Longfellow or Emily Dickinson kind, or sonnets or classic poems such as you and I might have been forced to memorize in high school. I take my own path less traveled and write contemporary free verse not necessarily identified by ending rhyme or meter although I employ both when it feels natural or when the idea requires it. Often I slip a matching rhyme right in the middle of a sense line or a few lines later. I use figures of speech and poetic devices while trying to make a point that my reader will understand without explanation. I format my psalms according to my own creative inclination and style. I freely use alliteration when emotion or ideas call for it to appeal to the ear. I punctuate as I please for emphasis—or sometimes not at all. I don't write psalms to exhibit literary technique. I try to write with emotional impact and aesthetic effect, not simply play with words or do a technical exercise of words on paper. I compose my psalms first of all as fragrant fruit offered to God to give pleasure to the Lord of the Harvest.

The Process of Psalming

Of course, my psalms are not to be understood on the spiritual level as King David's. I'm no King David. But just as his psalms were written in praise and adoration of God in his generation and for generations to come, so my psalms reflect my life experiences at this point in my own life history.

My psalms might look simple and effortless when the final product is seen in print. However, that is deceiving. The process is far from easy. A poem doesn't simply drop from Heaven fully formed any more than a newborn baby walks off the delivery table into life. A poem or any form of my writing rarely if ever comes to me full blown. An idea knocks on my mental door or on my heart when I read an arresting phrase or hear a picturesque expression, while reading Scripture, praying, or observing something intriguing or when reflecting on some aspect of truth God is teaching me. I invite the idea in,

pray and ponder on it awhile, perhaps a very long time, and try to discern where it wants to lead me. Each piece of writing requires multiple editings to polish and express my intention.

I can't "give birth to a poem" on demand or compose one instantly for some occasion. For me, writing requires some measure of a reflective life coupled with inspiration. Not the kind of inspiration, however, that is God-breathed, revealed Sacred Writ, as in the biblical Scriptures. Our society suffers from the lack of silence and time for reflection. I must first listen in silence and then speak and write out of it. It is God's natural rhythm, as the book of Ecclesiastes observes, "a time to be silent and a time to speak." I don't find poems floating on the surface of life. I must dive into deep waters for them.

Ideas for poems can come to me anytime. I must capture them like butterflies before they escape my grasp. Poetry writing is a subjective art bonded closely to one's emotions. I must write from the fullness of my life. I write when I am inspired and hear the music of words in my head. Then my pen begins to sing. Since a poem is basically "born" or "created," I don't worry about how it arrives on the delivery table. The human birth analogy breaks down at this point because it is only *after* the "baby" is born (after the poem has been drafted) that I experience the labor pains of editing and crafting and shaping until the poem is ready to articulate something meaningful. A poem arrives in my mind in potential; it doesn't arrive perfectly formed. It takes time for me to discover what the poem wants to be and say and then go with its flow.

Psalming from Life's Blunders and Burdens

David the king frequently wrote psalms-poetry when he got into major muddles and was calling for the rescue squad. I echo his dilemma. Mistakes, errors, faults, wrong decisions, unwise judgments, foolish actions, foul-ups, and sins are not confined to any era of time or calendar season of life. I am as prone to make life blunders in my advanced years when I am supposed to have accumulated some wisdom, as I was in my youth. I am still learning that if I try to fix or solve some of my self-caused life foul-ups, I dig myself still deeper and create a worse mess. I end up in despair. At times I have been afraid that my plight was unfixable. Just like King David, I also have to "call unto the Lord in my distress" (Psalm 18:6) with the result that "He rescues me." I join David in declaring, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). I admit my need and inability. I confess my impatience to be delivered. "But I am afflicted and needy; hasten to me, O God! Thou art my help and deliverer; O Lord, do not delay" (Psalm 70:5).

I hope I am finally coming to the point of trust. The Psalmist David and I are on the same page. "In God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid" (Psalm 56:4). The Lord who is all-wise, whom I can't see, bids me relax and trust Him and let Him work on my behalf. I lean back and gratefully watch Him take over.

My Personal Psalter

As the years went by, under the guiding hand of God my writing became a ministry and a high calling and God's gift to be invested for His glory. I constantly look to the Lord for His inspiration and creative enabling. In itself, creative writing is an honorable craft to be proud of and developed. People may misunderstand and view poets and authors unfairly as perhaps eccentric and not in touch with the real world. People think we are dreamy-eyed mystics who still write with quill pens and live in garrets. There are many myths about artists in general and poets in particular that make it difficult to be taken seriously. Sometimes when I reply to an inquiry about what kind of writing I do and admit that I don't write novels, people seem to act disappointed that I'm not a "real" writer.

I have spent a lifetime writing about our contemporary world from a Christian worldview and tried to express it in today's language. I have addressed today's issues and concerns in every changing

season of my life. I have tried to continually improve my writing skills and discipline myself to write quality poetry as well as meaningful prose. I am somewhat of a nonconformist since I don't follow specific classic or traditional formats. Each poet must find his own way. My style of poetry is a form of contemporary free verse. Not to criticize the preferred ways of others, but in contrast to some modern poets, I don't simply dance around on paper with words and sounds for their own sake and make the reader search for some obscure meaning, if there is any. I try to create a meaningful user-friendly poem with a point that is not concealed.

Eventually I published several anthologies of my poetry under separate titles: *Life, Stop Crowding Me; Heaven and Nature Sing; Songs of My Pilgrimage*; and *Divine Applications*. The first three titles are combined into one volume as a collection under the title *Celebrate This Moment*. My book *Living It Up!* is a combination of prose and poetry.

I titled a recent collection of contemporary verse *Latter Rain: Wordsmithing Verse in My Vintage Season*. A few years later it has morphed into a new book, *Psalms of My Harvest*. God is still generously *raining* His goodness, mercy, graces, blessings, and new adventures on me in my summit years. I consider this season of my life as my “vintage” writing time taking my cue from wine making. Vintage wine is defined as “exceptionally fine wine from a good year.” I hope that my current writing is “the best wine saved until last” from a mature harvest in the sense of Psalm 103:5. “[God] satisfies your years with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.” I hope that my overall writing is “the best of its kind *because of [my] antiquity!*”

I have used my poetry in the production of my radio broadcast ministry. My poetry is meant to be heard as well as read in print and “listened to” silently with the eyes. I have taught poetry workshops at writers' conferences from a desire to pass on the craft of versification to others who want to release the poet within themselves for the glory of God and for ministry. I used as a resource my published book *Release the Poet Within! How to Launch and Improve Poetry Craft and Ministry*. It is relevant for both the seasoned poet and the beginner as well as for those who want to understand and appreciate poetry for its own sake or for personal pleasure.

I began my first writing efforts early in life with poetry. I thought I would never be a writer of books because such longer and more involved writing required a different kind of talent and discipline. As it turned out, God had plans to expand my writing stewardship to many different genre. I believe that a writer who is a Christian must view himself and his creative work with the proper perspective. First of all, I must be aware that I write to glorify God with “verses to the King.” That is what David the Psalmist called his writings. The Psalms are a poetic songbook. Manly, strong, and powerful as a military leader and his country's historic sovereign, David is equally known as a poet and musician. David wrote about the issues and concerns of life and heart in his generation, as poets do, and as I aspire to.

The WORD and My Words

Writing poetry is a matter of processing words under inspiration. It is no coincidence that the incarnate Jesus, part of the Trinity, is called “the Word” in the Prologue of the Gospel of John. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among men and we beheld His glory....”

I work with human words which already exist in order to honor Jesus, the Eternal Word, who is self-existent. It is an honor to have a small part in the immense Kingdom program of God through my meager earth born words of witness to the Word made flesh as I exalt the love, mercy, and grace of God.

It is important for me to know who I am. I am only a voice crying in the wilderness of my culture, simply one small voice, a transient messenger for the One Who claimed I AM The Word! I know my place, Lord—I am *not The Word*; my words bear witness to *The Word*. However, I am

honored to *process words* and *flesh out thoughts* about *The Word*. The Eternal God *is The Word*; He is The Message that I, as His messenger, must communicate faithfully. The time will come when my mortal voice will be stilled, no longer audible to human ears. I will have said *my last word*, written my final blog post, sent my last email, penned my parting poem, finished my life's course. I will have put a period after the last sentence I've written in the concluding paragraph of my latest work-in-progress. I pray that *the words* of encouragement I have spoken in my lifetime and my *silent words* written not on parchment with an ancient quill by candlelight but typed on my PC for posterity on eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheets, while burning the midnight oil (*in modern terms: by the light of my fluorescent desk lamp*) while drinking black coffee (*not really—make it a decaf Latte*). In print, I aspire to continue to speak to those who have ears to hear, eyes to see the written page, and hearts to receive my account of *His faithfulness* Who *is The Word* made flesh.

I Have It Easier

How thankful I am that I don't have to chisel my poems on the rock walls of some cave, write in cuneiform on papyrus or tediously with a quill and homemade ink on a scroll. (See my chapter *Cave Walls to Cyberspace*). Or even pound them out on an antique model Underwood typewriter or even a Selectric model. A computer with word processing capabilities for producing flawless manuscripts makes writing and correcting and managing documents so easy that every writer can potentially be, *should be* professional. Technology advances so quickly that we are far beyond the wonders of the comparatively recent invention of the printing press. I can take advantage of online printing, on-demand publishing, ebooks and the ability to read books on my smart phone and other I-systems.

The following ideas selected from a poem in my chapbook *Divine Applications* employ computer terminology to understand my calling as “a word processor.” Lord, I'm available to be Your *Word processor*. You have committed to me the privilege and opportunity of communicating by allowing my words to become flesh, and dwell in the minds and spirits of Your people. May the words I express in print quicken the hearts of those who read what I write, those who need Your living touch. May I faithfully *process* Your thoughts with clarity, and write Your Truth with charity, not obscuring its purity with my verbosity. In *processing* Your *Word* may I be cleansed by it, washed as by water to become an open channel of Your glory and grace and not displace Your preeminent message with my own ideation. I

want to magnify YOUR WORDS in shift lock Caps with **24 point** font **boldface** style, underscored, and keep my own byline reduced to *9 point italics*.

Selective Resonance

Not everyone appreciates or understands poetry. That's okay. Some people simply aren't hard-wired to think in such a subjective genre and they may be left-brainers. That's reality and I respect that. At the same time, I have within me the strong desire to share what insights God has given me with someone who will enter into the subjective poetry experience with me.

If I believe that I have truly written a poem to my King of kings, to please Him will be enough even if I don't find a human friend to savor it. After long experience, I concluded that I must look to the Lord to connect me with such persons, few though they may be. When I find them, our rapport is profound and overlaid with joy and camaraderie. I'm aware that I take a calculated risk to open my heart-of-hearts to another person through sharing my poems. I am still vulnerable as I remember my reluctance to share my heart in this way in my youth for fear of rejection or indifference.

I bear some scars from that vulnerability, but what joy I feel when I find a counterpart heart! When I compose heart-words from my inmost soul, I find within myself a restless, hopeful desire to

share them with another heart, but not with just anyone, for he may not understand and may disparage that which is sacred to me. In fact, I often hide my heart from those closest to me. Although we share surface things of temporal life, there is a point beyond which I am alone. It is only in this aloneness, in the deep quiet of solitude that I carefully lift the napkin from my heart-of-hearts and reveal it first to my Lord, the Lover of my soul, who alone sees and knows me for what I am, defects and desires, weaknesses and needs. There, laid bare before its Maker, my heart snuggles close to His heart satisfied and accepted in being fully known, fully loved, and fully understood. Only then do I sense His approval to put my heart-words on paper, to take the risk and hope the hope that somewhere there will be a counterpart heart open to me, waiting to respond.

My Vintage Poetry

I have written poetry to articulate my life experiences and God-experiences throughout the calendar spring and summer of my life. During my present extended autumn, I have been writing the recent book *Psalms of My Harvest* specifically to express my life on the summit, as I call my advanced calendar years. My personal poetry psalms are on vintage topics which reflect whatever wisdom I might have accumulated in nine decades. Perhaps the best wine has been saved until last. Now in my autumn years the *psalms* aspect has blossomed as I probe the deeper meaning of life's experiences related to the One who has been the center of my life—Jesus Christ. This personal Book of Psalms is my hymnal expressing my emotions, questions, joys, laments, worship, struggles, prayers and dialogues with Deity during my longevity years. When you read my psalms, you will know me even if we never meet in person. What you read is what I am and Whose I am.

I wrestle with calling any of my poems “finished” because each time I read one again, even after it is published, I'm dissatisfied. Invariably I edit and polish it again because I hope that I can do better, that I have moved on to greater maturity and insight. Eventually I have to call a halt to the revision, allow my poem to stand naked and imperfect, and open the window to let it fly.