



FOR THIS YEAR'S serious topic, I debated over the events of September 11th and decided I have no other choice but to mention them; there are things I need to say. I offer my deepest sympathies to everyone who was affected in the worst of all possible ways by the events of that morning, and by the events which continue to transpire in their wake. I understand pain, I understand agony, I understand a feeling of being lost in a way that cries out for something to make it right; something to make the questions go away. I admit that like many people, if any of my children were murdered on that day, it is most likely I would be living this very moment doing my best to see somebody die horribly and painfully in return. But eventually we realize that such attitudes do us more harm than good. So as we should, as is wise, we have all tried to find positive things to say about that day, and indeed there are many. However, there is one thing which has been said that, for me, cannot be accepted. It has been said time and again that the day changed the world; that the world will never be the same since that morning. For the families of a few thousand people, this is true in a painfully practical sense. There are a great number of lives which will never be the same, and this is a tragedy. But the truth is, the world has not changed; it is still the same as it has always been.

September 11th showed us that men full of enough anger can mistake the passions of their own human hatred for the voice of a Loving God. It showed us that in the face of a few such men, there are far more people who have the courage to give up their own lives, even the life of their own precious baby aboard an airliner, for the lives of people they have never met. It showed us that there are still greater numbers of people who, in the face of evil and horror and suffering, respond in whatever way they can from a Love born of that same God. September 11th did not change the world; it offered us a glimpse of the world as it in Truth is. The world has always been about very, very basic things; about love, hatred, and courage to name just three. September 11th did not change this fact; it simply reminded us of it.

But within three months, our nation has returned to its preference of favorite weekly television shows over concern with current events. September and October's momentary tendencies to return to a house of worship, to be with our children in more meaningful ways, to be entertained less, to covet and shop less, to spend less resources on ourselves, to stay home more, to love and to cry more openly, are fading away. We are now returning to normal, and we proudly call this "moving on with our lives." It is far more correct to say we are going back to our lives, and this is precisely my point. The world has not changed, and it will never change until it no longer takes a human tragedy to divert our attention from our complacency. God knows we don't need another September 11th, but don't let us think it changed the world. The world will not change until for each of us, when we go home at night and awaken in the morning, there is no need to be reminded of the horror of hatred, and the power of courage and Love to overcome it. It will never change until there is nothing, absolutely nothing in our individual lives but the courage to Love with a passion that is so free and reckless and blinding that it cannot even fathom the concept of hatred of any kind. When I awaken

one morning to find this love in my soul, when I know that within me hatred has become impossible and only Love is Real, then for me the world will have changed.



AS I WRITE this letter tonight, the ground is covered in snow and although it is after ten o'clock, the moon reflecting from the snow makes it appear almost as if it is daylight outside; a quiet, soft kind of day. Somewhere in my neighborhood there are young adults playing in the cold whiteness of this night. The youthful exuberance of their laughter dances its way to my ears to make me smile, and I feel younger and more alive because of it. This is such a rare treat for us here in the desert that the last time I can remember this much snow was years and years ago. My how the years fly by us, and as we grow older we try to catch them in flight and hold onto them for just a moment more than physicality in its prodigality will often allow.

This year like each passing year has both relished the promise of new little lives and mourned the passing of others, reminding us how precious and special each and every one of us are in our own uniquely human way. I returned home this year from the memorial service of a friend and later I sat down alone and wondered to myself, who was this woman we all assume we knew? As I thought longer it occurred to me that I must at some level be able to stand by the dead body of a friend and be still and quiet and ponder their life and think soberly of what I knew of them and ask myself who or what they were in Truth. I must understand that I saw their body and I heard their laughter and I dried their tears and I ate with them and I watched the magic they could perform on a basketball court or in front of an artist's easel or when they opened their mouth to sing, but all of those things were only physical things that allowed me to witness something else more basic and profound about them. I must be able to understand that nothing I ever saw or heard or smelled or touched or tasted of them was actually them at all but rather only the shadows of a deeper being, desperately struggling to make itself more fully known to me.

We are each more than we appear, and if we are a little willing to sit alone and contemplate this for a while we will know that all the best and worst things we witness in each other are the shadows of the people we are trying to make known. With only the occasional bitter exception, we are all people who are struggling in this physical life to make known the spectacular, beautiful creature we truly are. We are all longing to love well and to be loved well, because of, and in spite of, who and what we are right here and right now. My hope for this year is that each of us may catch a meaningful glimpse of this great truth, and with this vision learn how easy and profound it is to see each other beyond all our apparent strengths and weaknesses; past the things we find so charming or so irritating in each other and ourselves, and know there is a love greater than the single peaceful nights, greater than the years we spend here, and greater than the people we seem to think we are. This is the love of which we are truly made. It is our true nature, and it flourishes in each of us, its laughter dancing elusively in our neighborhood – if we will only pause to listen to it for a moment.



PERHAPS AS I grow older, the contexts and landscapes within my heart and mind are broadening—broadening to see that all things are connected and we are all a part of everything, and how does one speak of this concisely and adequately? Poetry, I suppose—but I am not a poet. But what comes to mind as I sit here are two things. I think of Hemingway’s character Thomas Hudson, who utters in awe as he breathes his last breaths and his life flashes before him, “Everything is true.” And, I think of John Logan’s character Katsumoto, who in life notes that a person could spend their entire life looking for a perfect flower blossom and never find one—yet as he lie dying upon a battlefield he sees a vision full of flowers, and in glory says simply, “They are all perfect.”

As I bid 2003 a farewell, and as I think of you my friends and family, I consider all I have been given in life, a life of success and failure, of joy and sorrow, of tears and smiles—and I say this of life: Everything is true. Everything is perfect.

Such a vision is real, and it exists in the kingdom made clear by a man named Jesus—a babe we say was born in Bethlehem, swaddled and sleeping in Mary’s young arms. May that kingdom come into our hearts in all its fullness. This is my singular hope for all people everywhere. May God bless you, through this year and all of your life, toward this end.



THIS SEASON I’ve wanted desperately to offer some special message of comfort and peace to my family. Since last fall, we have been deeply affected by the passing of a number of our relatives, beginning with my father-in-law. We have been reminded of the great sorrows that the tragedies of human life can bring to bear, and how each person feels loss in his or her own unique and profound ways. I cannot pretend to know the pain of another; I know I cannot. And so, as I feel so helpless, what can I offer? I think only this simple thought...

This year I have learned anew and with penetrating clarity that a life lived well is a life that never truly ends. A life lived as an offering of itself to others is a life that lives on in bright, vibrant and beautiful ways in the lives of those it touched. There is a thread of God’s love that weaves its way through life from one person to another, and this love lasts for ever—animating us and binding us together from generation to generation. This love is absolutely true; the only truth there is. You and I can choose to carry forward this thread, sewing it into the fabric of each life we contact. A dozen generations from now the power of the love that was left to us by those who have departed can and will continue to shine in those who come along after us. Because of today, in the far off tomorrows of the future, our children’s children’s children will be able to see God’s love shining brightly. It will be there for them to see in all its glory because their parents will have shown them, because their parents will have shown them, because today we are showing them, because yesterday it was shown to us. Love never dies. It never, ever dies. It lives on forever. This, I now know, is true.

The question for us is whether we will devote ourselves to this cause, to sew the thread of God's love throughout the fabric of humanity, weaving a cloth to softly enwrap us all, offering us warmth in the darkest of times. Will we do this, or will we instead remain concerned with the richness of our material goods, with our careers, and with our next utility bill? Will we focus the entirety of our lives upon allowing God to love others through us, or will we focus instead upon the ordinary, the mundane, the temporal and trivial distractions of life?

I miss my father-in-law this Christmas. I know I don't miss him like his wife and children miss him, but I miss him. I miss the example of his life, as it was being lived, in action. He decisively answered these questions for himself. I am grateful for the wisdom of his reply, and I am grateful for the thread of love that ran through him—into all of us. Throughout this year and those to come, may we each live so well.

