

# ON THE LIFE AND DEATH AND LIFE OF MY BROTHER

by Stephen H. Phelps

*Psalms 23, 62, 139; Isaiah 40; Matthew 5*

Brother Tim had a hard life. Of some lives we say that they lived hard. Tim *had* hard, long and hard. If you did not know him, now you have heard from my family and from others why we say this. And you have learned also that he lived his ordeal with humbleness and often in a spirit of kindness, even sweetness, for which he is sort of famous.

Tim's hard story began here in Delmar. On a Youth Sunday in his adolescent years, Tim was offering the sermon from this very chancel. Some awful conflict of mind and emotion took hold of him during the talk, and for several minutes, his words formed a complaint utterly incoherent—words whose failure to marshal meaning was so plain and unexplainable that the whole society of the church felt confusion. *The minister's son!* You have seen stereotyped depictions of the early 1960s, how uptight and driven to conformity we all were. Some of that had to break. And Tim broke. In the spring of 1966, my parents told the whole church of Tim's schizophrenia, breaking through the surface of things in a way not at all easy then. Rev. Bob Lamar and Rev. Jim Miller, too, when he came to this Presbytery a few years later, both joined with my parents in a fellowship of practical care for Tim. It is good that the church can walk this way when life is hard.

Now, the story of Tim's life has already been painted with such care and detail that another stroke from another brush is not needed, though of course, we all have more. I want rather to put a frame around what has been given and what you have heard. For Timothy Gerth Phelps, baptized in Christ Jesus, the only fitting frame now is God's. I don't mean that, had you heard him quote the Bible, you would have been drawn to his expression of religiosity or that he kept to a practice of devotion which would have moved you. I mean only that if somehow he learned that we were gathered here to frame his life according to the light of God and say, "God is for us a refuge," Tim would say Amen to that.

The Old Testament has a word for those who bear extremely much, whether from disease, disaster, or domination. The word in Hebrew is "anawim"—the *anawim ha-aretz*—the least and the lost, sometimes translated "the wretched of the earth." Modern times have preferred the word "meek," but that's off the mark. On Earth's face, the *anawim* are numberless. Whoever wrestles with mental illness numbers among the *anawim*.

When we consider their lot, how their burdens are not lightened and their wounds not healed, year upon year, does it not feel strange on the tongue to sing of God that he is a refuge; that God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless; that the Lord is as a shepherd, though so many go wanting, not able even to lie down in peace; strange, that in the presence of our brother's enemies, mental and physical, we stand useless and see no table prepared for him, or for any like him; or that our ear should again hear our Lord saying *Blessed are the poor, blessed those who mourn*; and then the apostle's glorious cadence of confidence that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God? Is this not strange speech, laid up against the *anawim*! For those to whom nothing's real that can't be measured, this is madness, or rank injustice. For those who must have their God a manufacturer of miracles, such lofty speech invites excuses to ignore the sorrow of the *anawim* with platitudes of denial. "God never gives you more than you can bear," they chirp. Foolishness.

But here is a fact of faith, when unmixed with superstition, projection, or magical thinking. Across all times, throngs of the *anawim* have lived with a paradox in the soul, both knowing the evil they must bear and loving God. These, both at once—and this, not conditionally, not superstitiously, as if the wish for the end of the evil might come more reliably if they just pray right and stay right. No, just both: to love God, and to bear life. Jesus says, "Blessed are the *anawim*; for they shall inherit the earth." To the measuring mind and to the miracle-mongering-mind, this inheritance is hidden; life is hidden.

In the name of our Lord and of our brother Tim, and of all who suffer and live in faith, know this. To wait upon the Lord, to find in God our refuge, to receive power in powerlessness, and goodness and mercy all the days of our life—this is real. More firm than flesh, more present than blood or breath, valuable beyond measure. To those wise in the world's ways, you cannot prove that this strange word is other than delusion. To the power brokers who own and smash the earth, but will not inherit it, such peace passing understanding appears as mere passivity. To those who expect signs, who live in denial through dreams of future favor, unable to bear life as it is, faith so absolute seems like a diet of bark and straw.

You cannot teach such faith by word or method. But it can be learned. Now, there are two kinds of learning. The common kind involves a new insight or a new twist hooked into the fabric of all that you have come to know. Most learning is of that kind. The other kind is rare. It comes this way. Through another human, by the gift of God, a person sees a power for

being and living for which she has no reference point at all. She can't link and learn from the other's life in the ordinary way of learning, because she has no experience like this, no way to comprehend what is at work in the other. But she sees the evidence. In this void of not understanding, she learns that living is not what she thought, but larger, beyond her measure. This is the other kind of learning, learning from the sudden knowledge of one's own emptiness. Sometimes, in this shock of not understanding, hope becomes a teacher. It is not hope *for* something—an end to this or that, achievement of this or that—but rather hope absolute of any object, now or ever. Free. At peace. Certain that it is all right to live and all right to die.

Here live the *anawim*, some of them, by the grace of God. So also here live many who are not burdened with evils now. This life, lived in hope absolute of any object whatsoever, Christians have always called *life eternal*. It is a gift, a way of seeing. It can't be taught. It can be sought, as one feels oneself longing for the waters from which the apostle drank, when he said "In all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need;" longing for the depth of the apostle's assurance that "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's;" longing for the confidence that "now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

The refuge all call God is of this quality. It is a paradox of pure inward vitality. *It is high, I cannot attain it*, says the psalmist; *for even the darkness is not dark to you, O God; the night, as bright as the day, for the darkness is as the light to you*. Here, Tim lived sometimes. Here Tim died, for certain, and here Tim lives. So also you. May you know this, and live this, and love God who gives this. Amen.

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