

HERE AT STONY BROOK - Monday, Dec. 20, 1982

THEME UP AND OUT

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Hi, everybody. This is Al Oickle. I'm with the Office of University News Services at the State University of New York, here at Stony Brook. Today I will be talking with Dr. Swartz and with Dr. Peter Manchester, a professor in religious studies, here at Stony Brook. The subject is Christmas, and much more. The subject is prayer, and poetry, and the ways that we express that human condition called faith, and hope, and optimism.

Perhaps the best way to start off, Dr. Swartz, is by having you read one of your verses. The one I have in mind is from your collection, called "Prayers from the Nave," PROFESSOR SWARTZ read "Unprepared for Christmas."

AFO: Dr. Manchester, one of your special academic areas of interest is Christian doctrine. How do you react to the poem Cliff Swartz just read, and to ~~the~~ the thoughts the verse represents?

INTERVIEW DR. SWARTZ - Physicist as poet  
DR. MANCHESTER - Theologian as physicist

DISCUSS - Other poems by Cliff Swartz  
THEME UP AND UNDER  
AFO

We've come to the end of another program, Here at Stony Brook. Until next week, this is Al Oickle. So long, everybody.

*HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM AL OICKLE*



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MIRACLES

(The three wise men are on stage. The other scenes, which they will turn to, are hidden.)

Gold:       It was a mistake.  
              The dreams, the prophecies,  
              All have misled us.  
              We are three foolish men  
              Who thought that by our wisdom  
              We could find a heavenly king.  
              Look where the star has brought us!  
              A manger, and a common, lowly birth.

Frankincense: Brother, you give up too soon.  
              If we are misled, it is only  
              By outward appearances.  
              My dreams are far more real to me  
              Than these poor walls or humble folk.  
              Trust my instinct in these matters.  
              Divinity surrounds this place  
              Waiting to catch us by surprise.

Myrrh:       If you mean the odor that surrounds us here,  
              I am not surprised, considering the circumstances.  
              But it is an honest smell  
              And we have been honest in our venture.  
              We sought a king, a savior,  
              A new beginning for our world.  
              We looked for miracles and revelations.  
              Instead, we find a baby being born;  
              A baby without wealth or station  
              Who will surely follow in his father's steps  
              And be a useful carpenter, building solid furniture.  
              Perhaps we *have* our revelation.  
              Perhaps it is the nature of divinity  
              To crown the man who knows enough  
              To fashion chairs from trees.

Gold:       You mock us with your devious sophistry





Joseph: Oh, thanks!  
May God reward your generosity  
As I would do, had I the means.

Inn Keeper: Rest easy on that score.  
I would have found for you  
A better birthing place than in this stable  
Had not the Roman taxes  
Brought so many people here  
And filled my inn to bursting.  
I'll tell you plain. I don't much hold  
With Caesar's counting us.  
But still, it's good for business.  
Do not the holy priests themselves  
Fare better in a time of trouble,  
Collecting fees to shelter us  
From census of the devil?  
I follow their example  
In doing well by doing good.

Joseph: I'll raise a toast to you for that  
And pray your profits  
Match your kindness.

Inn Keeper: Come, tell me, carpenter from Nazareth.  
What will you call your new-born child?


Joseph: His name was given in a dream  
His mother had before he was conceived.  
There is some mystery, I confess,  
Concerning that conception.  
I'll tell you, since you are a friend,  
And since my tongue is warmed  
With friendship's wine.  
I have not known this child  
Who is my lawful wife,  
Though clearly, she *was* known.  
She was betrothed to me



And when I found she was with child  
I would have put her privately away  
To shelter her from scandal.  
But then an angel came to me in dreams  
And told me that my bride, a virgin still,  
Had yet conceived by intervention of the Lord.  
I am a lowly carpenter  
And do not understand these things.  
Yet I obeyed and with a troubled heart  
Have taken her to wife, and will,  
Obedient to the vision that I saw,  
Become a father to another's son.

Inn Keeper: All this is strange.  
I don't much fancy dreams.  
What does the baby's mother say?

Joseph: She also dreamed  
And heard such wondrous things  
That I cannot repeat them  
Lest you think me mad.  
An angel said that this would be  
A very special child,  
And we should call him, Jesus.

Inn Keeper: Well, that's a name as good as any,  
Since I suppose you wouldn't  
Want to call him, Joseph.   
I mean, under the circumstances.  
No offence, but she's a pretty little wife.  
If I were you, I'd keep a sharp eye out  
For angels, if you get my drift.  
Here, let me fill your glass.  
New fathers shouldn't be too sober,  
Especially when their children are so - special.

(Scene fades. Back to the three wise men.)



Frankincense: You heard them. This is not a common birth.  
 There is a mystery here.  
 The dreams I had, the star we followed,  
 All are matched by other dreams  
 And angel apparitions.  
 How could she be virgin, yet bear child,  
 Unless there were a miracle?  
 This child must be the very son of God!

Gold: Your blind acceptance of this youthful tale  
 Must be the greater miracle.  
 In every land through which we've passed  
 The gods beget their demi-gods, half human, half divine.  
 Indeed, the pagan gods apparently  
 Have time for little else.  
 Do you believe the one, true God,  
 The ruler of the earth below and firmament above,  
 Has stooped to carnal love with humans?  
 And if He did, would He not choose a queen  
 Or some great beauty, rather than a peasant's daughter?

Myrrh: I do not think that we should circumscribe this God,  
 Or hem Him in with human tastes or fashions.  
 If such a God exists, he could produce a son from dust,  
 As surely as, in time, He turns us all back into dust.  
 If I accept one miracle, I will not strain at others.

Gold: What miracle? I see none.

Myrrh: Well, there was a birth.

Gold: A most common event.  
 I see no miracle in births.

Frankincense: Nor would you see one,  
 Though the heavens opened  
 And angel guides pointed it out to you.



Myrrh: Look here! This simple birth has brought more visitors.  
Perhaps they also dreamed or followed stars.  
Perhaps the angels in their dreams  
Have been their guides to bring them here.

(Scene shifts to stable with old and young shepherd, inn keeper, and wife.)

Old S: Is this the place?  
Is there a baby here  
Whose birth has been announced by angels?

Inn Keeper's Wife: In a small town, word spreads fast, I know.  
But besides the two of us,  
No one else has heard about this birth  
Except my daughter, and she's no angel.  
Not that she isn't good enough for you, there, Andrew.

Young S: Oh, too good, m'am, though I have hopes.  
But we have seen most wondrous things tonight.  
On Nahab's hill, where we kept watch,  
Our sheep were strangely restless.  
We feared a wolf, but then the eastern sky grew light  
As though the sun would rise again.  
I heard a trumpet call and sound of singing,  
And suddenly the light became so bright  
That I could hardly bear to look.  
A band of angels arched the sky  
And formed a bridge from earth to heaven.  
The sheep had clustered close, our dogs had yelped away,  
And I was sure the world had ended.

Inn Keeper: You saw this, too?

Old S: Well, it was bright all right,  
And something scared the dogs.

Young S: He could not see, because he was so scared  
He fainted dead away.  
But I could hear them saying  
Not to fear, that all was well.



They said a child was born in Bethlehem  
 Who would be King, our savior.  
 And then they vanished in a cloud of light  
 That swirled and burned  
 While thunder echoed from the hills.  
 And yet it was not thunder,  
 But sounded more like music.

Inn Keeper: The countryside is live with angels,  
 Apparently speaking only to young people.

Inn Keeper's  
 Wife: Well, there is a baby here,  
 But if he is a king, he has a ways to go.  
 Right now he looks like any other new-born babe,  
 And that's not much, except perhaps to mothers.  
 You may see him, if you like,  
 But don't excite them with your angels.

(Scene fades. Back to the three wise men.)

Frankincense: The portents coincide - our dreams, the star,  
 A virgin birth, and now the heavens open.  
 God is surely in this place  
 And we are blessed to be his instruments.

Myrrh: I never doubted God was here  
 Or anywhere His humans can imagine Him.  
 Our power to dream and fashion visions  
 Would be beyond belief, were it not even more miraculous  
 That we can make our thoughts agree  
 With what our hands can sense,  
 And see a solid world in common.  
 We are blessed, indeed, to be a member of this vision.

Gold: When I'm awake, I do not dream.  
 I want my thoughts in order, and keep them close to earth.  
 Who has seen these lights and heard these angels?  
 A child bride, a nervous groom, a shepherd boy!

Still  
 delicious

Frankincense: And a philosopher; I also dreamed.

Gold: Your instincts, whether dreams or intuition or pure luck,  
Have indeed proved fruitful in the past, old friend.  
In grumbling, I do not mean to slight your dreams.  
Did I not come this long, hard way with you?  
Now we are here. Let's see this child  
And satisfy our curiosity.

(Scene shifts to inside stable. First Mary, later joined by Joseph.)

(Lullaby)

Mary: Well, mouse, are you happy now?  
What do you see with those big eyes?  
I'll smile at you and soon you'll learn to smile at me,  
And clutch my finger in your tiny ones.  
Oh, such a frown, and such a pain.  
One more bubble out of you and  
Then we'll see if you will sleep.  
You mustn't think that I will always  
Spank like this, unless, of course, you're naughty.  
But you will always mind me, won't you?  
And mind your father, too, poor Joseph,  
For he will be your father.  

---

Oh, what a little mystery you are.  
The voice was once so clear  
That told me I would have you.  
I moved in dreams, the world  
Just glowed around me.  
In morning times I felt not sick, but faint,  
As if there were no need to touch the earth.  
Throughout the afternoons my fullness  
Left me sleepy, like a purring cat.  
How my mother worried and friends talked!  
But happiness and peace so filled me  
There was no room for fear.  
God's angel said that I was blessed.  
My soul has magnified that love  
And now it lives and breathes  
And suckles at my breast.



Dear little Jesus!

I do not know what God intends for you  
When you are grown and are a man,  
But now, right now, I know  
That you are God's own love, and mine.

Joseph: Mary, are you sleeping or awake?

Mary: I am half way in between  
And drifting pleasantly.  
Come sit with me,  
And tell me what a handsome boy we have.  
Is he not beautiful?

Joseph: I think he is, and so do all our visitors.  
Oh, Mary, it is strange that they should come.  
What marvelous tales they tell  
Of angel visitations and a star  
That led them here.  
I did not see the star, did you?

Joseph's  
wonder

Mary: Not one, but many stars.  
Last night, while I was riding on the donkey,  
I thought the stars all danced  
And bobbed along with me.  
They seemed so close that each one  
Lighted up our path to Bethlehem.

Joseph: I kept my eyes to earth  
In fear that we might fall, or lose our way.  
The keeper of the inn has ready explanations  
For all these strange events.  
He gives me sound advice - and worries.  
Your dreams all seem to leave you calm  
And older than your years.  
I, too, received a dream  
Which leaves me troubled and confused.

Mary: Trust Him who sends us dreams.  
He has not failed us yet.  
Look at our healthy, sleeping child,  
Our peaceful refuge, and these  
Friends who shelter us.  
See how our dreams are shared by others,  
By shepherds, and by kings.

Joseph: One king, at least.  
They all are very wise,  
But argue endlessly among themselves  
About the meaning of their journey.

Mary: I know. They talk and talk,  
But *I* have had the child.

(Scene fades. Back to the three wise men.)

Gold: Brothers, it is time to go.  
We will not find our answers here.  
Perhaps in years to come  
There will be deeds so tangible  
That issued from this night  
That all the world can see and handle them.  
But now I only see a peasant girl,  
A carpenter afraid he may not be a father,  
And a baby. A baby wrinkled like all others,  
Whose face and form will not be known for many years,  
But one who surely is constrained by lowly birth  
To lead a humble life without significance.

Frankincense: Our eyes behold the same events;  
The same sounds touch our ears.  
Yet in this humble birth<sup>birth</sup>  
I see the hand of God,  
And hear the joy of heaven.

Myrrh: That is why we travel well together.



One knows the earth;  
The other knows the stars.

Gold: And what do you contribute?

Myrrh: A pleasant voice, some songs along the way,  
And questions, questions to your answers.  
I'll ask a question of you now.  
You came prepared to offer tribute to a king.  
What will you give a peasant's son?

Gold: If he had been a king,  
I would have offered gold.  
Kings never have too much of gold,  
As well we know.  
From gold he could have fashioned crowns,  
Or waged a timely war of conquest.  
But this is not a king.  
He will, most likely, be a carpenter.  
Instead of gold, should I leave wood?  
But what if *you* are right?  
Should we not give according to your dreams?  
And even if you're wrong,  
Why not give according to our means?  
We have caused some trouble for these folk  
And raised their apprehensions  
If not their expectations.  
Besides, the gold is heavy  
And might prove burdensome along our homeward way.  
With all their foolish dreams of heaven,  
This family will need earthly help.  
I'll give them gold.

Frankincense: Your heart sees truth your mind refuses.  
I sought a holy prince  
And know beyond a doubt, we've found him.  
I'll give them frankincense to burn,  
An incense rare and suitable for God.

On holidays, its subtle fragrance can enfold the child,  
And thus remind him of his blessed destiny.

Myrrh: Since one of you has made him king  
And one of you has made him God,  
I'll give him myrrh  
To make him human like the rest of us.  
For he will die.  
His broken body will need ointments.  
The portents which foretold his birth  
And brought us here, were read by many.  
Whether he be God or carpenter  
He is a symbol, a promise, and a threat.  
His birth will be the death of many.  
His death will mean rebirth to many more.

Gold: Isn't it an awkward and unseemly gift,  
Reminding parents that their son must some day die?

Myrrh: But birth and death are one;  
God gave them both together.  
If you had made this universe,  
Would you have fashioned death?  
And yet unless the old trees fall  
The saplings cannot grow.  
Who would want a world of grizzled giants,  
Changeless, without fruit or blossoms?  
One miracle requires the other.  
The miracle of birth requires the gift of death.

Gold: You twist words as well as thoughts.  
Miracles are things unusual, unexpected  
Birth and death are common.

Myrrh: Here and now, perhaps,  
But in the greater scheme of things  
They are surprising and mysterious.  
Where else among the stars  
Do mothers nurse their babies?



And even if, in future age,  
We unravel out the coded threads of life  
And find out what we are,  
When in all eternity  
Will we learn who we are and why we're here?  
I think that we have seen a miracle this night.  
A baby has been born.  
A growing, thinking human has been created  
Out of love, and things that grow from earth.  
And that is miracle enough, at least for me.  
Let's leave our gifts  
That celebrate both birth and death  
And journey home, rejoicing.

Mary's Lullaby

Now eat and grow  
And take from me  
The milk and love you need.  
Be part of me  
A little while  
Before we part indeed.

Now look and touch  
And learn to smile  
And I will smile at you.  
May all you touch  
And see bring joy  
In your bright world so new.

Now sleep and dream  
And heaven's peace  
Surround you from above.  
And while you sleep  
I'll hold you close  
And shelter you with love.