



Genesis of a Hymn

Treasure No 43: Genesis of a Hymn by Brian Wren: An article from Bulletin 143, Autumn 1978

How do hymns get written? Readers may find it interesting to eavesdrop on the process of composition of one particular hymn—or is it a song?

Stage 1: Inspiration

While I was thinking of a friend's experience of bereavement, the following four lines came, unbidden, to mind:

*In any hurt
of sorrow or rejection
there is no guarantee
of resurrection.*

This seemed to be the beginning of something—a verse perhaps. Obviously something more needed to be said. So I repeated it several times, to see what rhythm naturally followed it, laying the following lines. Thus emerged the complete verse, with the final four lines as yet unfilled:

<i>In any hurt</i>	4
<i>of sorrow or rejection</i>	7
<i>there is no guarantee</i>	6
<i>of resurrection</i>	5
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-----	11

This gives a metre of 11.11.6.6.11, with the first two lines divided into 4.7 and 6.5 .

Stage 2: Planning

How can a hymn or song develop from this? My usual method is to jot down ideas which crystallize around the original inspiration, then set them in order, so that each verse states one main idea, and the whole has a coherent development of thought. This yielded the following plan. It was a working basis, and some parts had to be altered later. (For example, I started with the analogy of Christ's crucifixion, as can be seen in the progression from Gethsemane to Resurrection, but this proved to be only a partial guide. The final result stands on its own: it is not an allegory of the Passion.)

1. 'Gethsemane': Smashing blows of fate—we're overwhelmed, struck down, can only cling to faith.

Note—the hymn will not be about bereavement only, but will include other experiences akin to death-and-resurrection, such as the death of love, and the crises of accident, disappointment, parting, setback-and-

recovery. It's important to see dying as the most final and complete consummation of the many 'little deaths' we experience before it.

2. 'Crucifixion': Scouring the depths of desolation. Feeling utterly forsaken by God, and knowing only afterwards that the depth of the divine love somehow *shares in* that forsakenness—is inside it, not simply alongside it.

3. 'Burial': Need to 'bury the past hurt' and leave it behind—idea soon discarded, as making the hymn too long.

4. 'Resurrection': We can't *choose* the moment of our 'rising again' when we emerge from grief, or bitterness, or disappointment. It is experienced as a gift, not an act of will—like becoming aware that clouds have rolled away.

5. Summary In any such hurt there's no *guarantee* that we'll come out of it. To talk as if there is—'don't worry, you'll come out of it'—reduces personal distress to a sort of mechanism: if mourning is an automated process there's no need for compassion. We often talk as if that were the case. So—no guarantee, but ... But what? Perhaps just the faith that love has the potential to create new life.

Having planned thus, I saw that the lines I had started with were part of the summary, the end of the song. So I had the problem of how to begin. It's always easier to develop an idea if the first lines crystallize first!

Stage 3: Composition

Because the last lines had come first, I had to hop about, and work at each of the verses in turn, moving back and forth so that the final result would be a unity, without side-tracking or repetitions. What follows shows the development of thought for each individual verse. It can't show the hopping about, which manifested itself in shuffling many sheets of paper, each a mass of attempts and alternatives. Verse 1, shown first, was in fact the last verse to find its final shape.

Verse One

Words or phrases in brackets represent first attempts later discarded. The first complete verse read:

*When laughter dies
in heartbreak or dejection (and life has no direction)
and faith and friends an prayers
give no protection,
Lord, help us to retain
the echo of your name,
live day by day, and hope for resurrection.*

On reflection, the first line, 'when laughter dies', is graphic, yet does not capture the suddenness and shock of the experience which triggered off composition. And the prayer form of the last three lines isn't right either. If you're talking of real desolation, 'Lord help us to retain' is too placid and assured to describe what is in reality a terrible *struggle* to hold on to any vestige of faith. So the second attempt—without as yet a substitute for the first line—was to transfer the 'no protection' idea to the end, and speak of the struggle to cling to faith; shocking as it may seem some people's experience is that 'faith, and friends, and prayers' give no protection:

<i>When laughter dies</i>		
<i>and heartbreak</i>	or	<i>dejection or in heartbreak or dejection</i>
<i>bewilder every hope</i>	or	<i>that barely give us hope</i>
<i>or resurrection</i>		<i>(or 'give no guarantee')</i>
<i>We struggle to retain</i>		

*the echo of Christ's name
though faith and friends and prayers give no protection*

The first line is still too weak, and the last line has too many nouns—or rather, it doesn't flow. The two fricatives and a plosive (*f*aith and *f*riends and *p*rayers) slow the utterance, and the two 'ands' make it into a chant. So, although true to experience, they'll have to be modified. 'Bewilder every hope' came to seem a bit strong, and I finally decided to duplicate 'give no guarantee' in first and last verses, to give the hymn a formal unity, although varying the details of the experience in each case. But the verse still needs a flash of inspiration for the first line—something to describe the sense of being swept away, undermined, overwhelmed or, yes!, *drowned*. To say that 'joy is drowned' will also help to heighten the contrast. And the last line can have 'hope running dry', to retain the main point, yet prepare for the second verse, and its entry into desolation. So emerges the final form:

*When joy is drowned
in heartbreak or dejection
that gives no guarantee
of resurrection
We struggle to retain
the echo of Christ's name
though hope run dry, and faith gives no protection.*

Verse Two

*If we must scour
the depths of desolation ...*

These two lines came very early. Then I got stuck, and played unsuccessfully with the idea of 'each stronghold shaken'. Finally, and suddenly, while writing the words out yet again (which seems to help composition) the next two lines flowed on from them:

*... and make of grey despair
a blood relation.*

This kind of despair is grey as a winter's day. Not black, but a *bleak* despair, which slows down the pace of life. It is enfeebling and enervating. I like 'bleak'; it's a short word which does a lot of work, so let's use it in the next line—

*Lord, in our bleakest hell,
let but your silence tell or (your own anguish tell/still let your silence tell)
how love, in love, was once by love forsaken.*

This last line refers to the cry of dereliction on the cross. Perhaps it's too compressed a thought. At any rate, it's something you can perceive, it seems, only after the experience itself. In the desolation itself you know only God's silence, God's absence. The experience of God's silence is what defines it as desolation. The lines suggest that—speaking in trinitarian forms—if the Son knew what it was to be forsaken, the Father knew the grief of forsaking and loss, yet both are held together in love. Perhaps the desolation was the only way in which God's work in Christ could be completed.

Verse Three

*We cannot speed (choose/time)
the moment of our waking...*

We can't time it—i.e. plan it in advance, control it, or mark it ahead as a date on a calendar. Such marking helps only if we're inwardly ready to make such external things the measure of our changing—and that

implies that the changing has already begun. It's a gift. So we cannot *speed* the moment of our waking, hasten it—

*by rage, or acts of will
to stem the aching.*

Before that there was an idea of the day of personal resurrection being shaped by 'events beyond our making', but the idea didn't work out. These first lines came easily. The rest of the verse was a struggle—

but hope to recognise?

No. By definition, we can write such a hymn only *after* the experience of personal resurrection which it expresses. So what we need here is a statement of experience, looking back, not of hope-in-advance. So try:

*but only recognise
a stillness of surprise (with hesitant surprise)
when clouds have passed (darkness lifts) and dawn at last is breaking.*

The moment of recovery is seen only after it has occurred, when we say, 'Well I never, I can actually live again'. The 'stillness of surprise' (clearly the better phrase) is an inner discovery, stopping us in our tracks, as we realise that the long darkness is over. I originally had 'wisps' or 'strands' of dawn breaking, but eventually got 'have passed ... at last', which is a neat internal rhyme and has the additional value of suggesting joy-with-relief (at *last!*).

Verse Four

In the original lines above, 'hurt' and 'sorrow' seemed, on reflection, too weak. 'Sorrow' is vague, yet tied too much to the kind of desolation (bereavement) I started from. It is not capable of extension to other sorts of desolation experience. So I changed it to:

*In any grief
of parting or rejection
there is no guarantee
of resurrection.*

The rest of the verse was more difficult. The first attempt ran:

*Lord, in our bleakest days
help us to trust and praise
and lift us up to life and joyful action.*

The last line came straight to the pen, and I detect in it an echo of the style of another hymn writer, Fred Kaan (although I don't know if he does!). The preceding lines, however, are very weak. They need to say what the Lord's love *can* do—and in any case I later found I wanted to use 'bleakest' in verse two. So the next try was:

*but Christ his promise gives
that still his Spirit lives
to raise up (etc.)*

The biblical overtone of 'raise' improves the last line, but the earlier lines are still too bland. They need to suggest not certainty—there is no *guarantee*—but the potential of love, what God's love (and human loving) can do. They must not suggest that love does anything automatically and mechanically (see above) nor yet glibly (smile, brother, because everything in the garden will be lovely). So let's try:

*but love has still the power
to bear our darkest hour
and raise (etc.)*

‘Darkest hour’ is an improvement, but we still need the idea of the *unexpectedness* of the rising again. We need to speak of love’s *unexpected* power—yes! ...

*yet in our darkest hour
love’s unexpected power
can raise us up ... (Etc.)*

So, after all the work, the completed version looks like this.

‘Resurrection Now’

*When joy is drowned
in heartbreak or dejection
that gives no guarantee
of resurrection
we struggle to retain
the echo of Christ’s name
though hope run dry, and faith gives no protection.*

*If we must scour
the depths of desolation
and make of grey despair
a blood relation,
Lord, in our bleakest hell
let but your silence tell
how love, in love, was once by love forsaken.*

*We cannot speed
the moment of our waking
by rage, or acts of will
to stem the aching,
but only recognise
a stillness of surprise
when clouds have passed, and dawn at last is breaking.*

*In any grief
of parting or rejection
there is no guarantee
of resurrection,
yet in our darkest hour
love’s unexpected power
can raise us up to life and joyful action.*

The friend for whom it was written confirmed that it reflected her own experience. Later, I Pooh-hummed a melody, and Peter Cutts harmonized it. But that’s another story.

UFFINGTON

Peter Cutts

When joy is drowned in heart-break or de-jection that

The first system of musical notation for the hymn 'UFFINGTON'. It consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: 'When joy is drowned in heart-break or de-jection that'.

gives no guar-antee' of re-sur-rec-tion we strug-gle to re-

The second system of musical notation. The lyrics are: 'gives no guar-antee' of re-sur-rec-tion we strug-gle to re-'.

tain the e-cho of Christ's name though hope runs dry, and faith gives no guar-tee-tion

The third system of musical notation. The lyrics are: 'tain the e-cho of Christ's name though hope runs dry, and faith gives no guar-tee-tion'.

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