

a way of knowing

Joy Mead

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contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| A way of knowing | 9 |
| Beginnings | 11 |
| <i>Part one</i> Looking | |
| Poetry | 16 |
| Looking | 17 |
| What I know about place | 19 |
| Feet on the ground | 20 |
| Christmas child | 22 |
| Recognising the gift | 23 |
| Straight lines are overrated | 24 |
| In a cottage garden | 26 |
| Going home | 27 |
| A parable of things and earthiness | 28 |
| What I know about Orkney is that ... | 29 |
| A day in October | 31 |
| Web | 32 |
| Poet in the gallery | 33 |
| Wild places | 34 |
| Iron age camp | 35 |
| Wood | 36 |
| Watercress and harebells | 37 |
| Against forgetting | 38 |
| Postcards from Iona | 39 |
| Buckinghamshire beeches | 40 |
| Cow parsley | 41 |
| The smell of a book | 42 |
| Scissors | 43 |
| Hanging out the words | 44 |
| The colour of maybe | 46 |
| St John's Wort | 47 |

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| Ringing rock – Iona | 50 |
| Winter haiku | 50 |
| What I know about orchards | 51 |
| Mythweaver | 52 |
| Mellow fruitfulness | 53 |
| Beauty of Bath | 54 |
| The boat | 55 |

Part two Seeing

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| A grain of sand | 58 |
| Seeing | 59 |
| The path | 62 |
| What I know about flowers ... | 62 |
| Waiting | 64 |
| A very poetic prophet | 66 |
| Through a glass darkly ... | 68 |
| A seasoned day | 69 |
| ‘What makes a person holy?’ | 70 |
| Surprise! | 72 |
| After lunch | 74 |
| Walking to Erraid | 75 |
| Butterfly | 76 |
| A memory of apples | 77 |
| Pomona and Vertumnus | 78 |
| Re-shaping | 79 |
| After the war | 80 |
| Brave new morning | 81 |
| Come yew hare long o me | 82 |
| The moment’s song | 83 |
| Sweet sorrow | 83 |
| Self portrait | 84 |
| What I know about war ... | 84 |
| War | 86 |
| Demolition | 87 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Pearls | 88 |
| It's a question | 88 |
| Skeleton tree | 89 |
| String trio, Peter Maxwell Davies | 90 |
| What music does | 91 |
| Iona morning | 92 |
| Winding ways and accidental flowers | 93 |
| Holding on | 94 |

Part three Sharing

| | |
|---|-----|
| All the earth | 96 |
| Sharing | 97 |
| Brackets | 100 |
| Prayer (1) | 101 |
| Sacrum – the bowl of birth | 102 |
| Open eyes, open hands ... | 104 |
| Lament | 107 |
| Soil and soul | 109 |
| Yeast that a woman took | 110 |
| Making bread is an elemental activity ... | 112 |
| Listen to the silence | 114 |
| Prayer (2) | 115 |
| Writing the spirit | 116 |
| My pen | 119 |
| Prayer (3) | 120 |
| Wondering into a story | 121 |
| Nicodemus | 123 |
| Prayer (4) | 124 |
| Mary | 125 |
| Poppy field | 126 |
| A proverbial story | 127 |
| Underneath are the everlasting arms: a reflection for Mothering Sunday | 128 |
| Sisera's mother | 129 |

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Sacrifice | 134 |
| Prayer (4) | 135 |
| Gate to the isles | 135 |
| Midwinter fire | 136 |
| Once upon a time ... | 137 |
| Trust the story | 139 |
| The good storyteller | 141 |
| Prayer (5) | 142 |
| Advent Sunday 2007 | 143 |
| 'Be worthy of the bread's aroma' | 144 |
| Trusting life | 145 |
| To my newborn grandson | 145 |
| Celebrating an ordinary day | 150 |
| Pieces of a life | 151 |
| Let us be grateful | 152 |
| On the road | 153 |
| Prayer (6) | 154 |
| Famine road | 155 |
| A welcome for William | 157 |
| Emily's song | 159 |
| Summer song | 161 |
| Oliver | 162 |
| Seven blessings | 163 |
| Ordinary, particular, universal | 164 |
| Uncovering more ... | 165 |
| Notes | 166 |

a way of knowing

The heightened colours
in an ordinary room
where a child sleeps,
empty bowls on the table,
a turning dial
on a washing machine,
the old man who waits
for tomorrow's sun,
the star that fell from an envelope
my grandsons gave me at Christmas,
cabbages in an organic garden,
lights in my neighbour's window,
gannets over the sea,
dolphins in the sound
on a day of delight,
a boat under a tarpaulin,
the words of a prayer
taken out of the ordinary
run of language,
a pile of stones, waiting
like the words of a poem
for the hands
that will guide them,
the lasting colour
of birch leaves
at the end of autumn,

the handful of seeds
and the mouthful of bread
that make despair impossible.

A way of being and placing,
seeing and naming,

that holds the intensity
of the moment,
cherishing it,

playing the music of dailyness
through all remembering:
a way to the intelligence
of the heart.

beginnings

We're not short of information and there's no doubt that readily available facts and figures, data and statistics are useful to us. We need them, but not to excess – a few will often do! At the same time, we have to recognise that so much of what is essential for wholeness of life can never be measured or known in any quantifiable or scientific sense. Love and compassion lie in the realm of the unquantifiable, and so does our response to beauty, and to the natural world around us when we are not busy measuring its usefulness.

Alongside our intellectual knowledge exists that quiet wisdom, in its own place, which is indigenous knowledge. We need such imagination, discernment, understanding, perception. So much of this kind of knowing comes initially through our senses (our awareness, our attentiveness to things, how we look and see, listen and hear, touch and respond); it comes through our experiences, through our relationships with others, with our earth, or maybe through story, poetry, music, song and sounds. We don't absorb significant experiences as abstractions – we take them personally. They are written on our bodies. They are particular to us but often become universal in the sharing, the telling. For all experience is valid. Each story has significance: it will almost inevitably be about what we value – how we celebrate the values we live by, how we experience the challenges to those values. Through our stories (however expressed) we learn about our struggles, we tell of our experience and we begin to understand ourselves. Sharing the story of who we are and what we have seen, and listening to the stories of others: these are amongst the greatest things we do in our time on earth.

I wonder what this might mean for us in the twenty-first century in terms of what we still call 'worship', although I often

wonder, too, what we think we mean by that word and by the way we use worship space. Isn't worship, after all, gathering to rejoice and to grieve, to celebrate and to lament? It's struggling to find a way to express what it means to be alive and to be human. It's bringing people to one another, into knowing and into unknowing.

So, for me, worship has to be about poetry ... and theology maybe, but in the end they are much the same. Poetry is more than a particular arrangement of words on a page. It's a way of being, a way of seeing and a way of knowing. It's about awareness and consciousness, being fully alive in all our experiences. Poetry is not a vehicle for ideas. It shows what we have touched and seen and heard. Through poetry we find our own story to live by.

I hope that *A Way of Knowing* might be a book to use not just *in* worship but to encourage different approaches to and understandings of worship: an exploration not only of what we do but of how we think, the words we use and how they might be received by others. This would mean seeking to make the worship space bigger, much bigger, so that we look at *how* we experience all life and bring our seeing to such a space.

By this, I don't mean thinking about projects but rather creating a blessed or sacred empty space into which all life might flow. I'm looking for something viable to replace what is no longer working for so many people. In the actual physical space paper might be unfurled for painting. A film might be projected onto a wall. Music might be played. Some might write or cook or sew or plant. There could be drama created out of whatever is at hand – objects and emotions ... all our concerns, what we value, our anger and our compassion – and, through this creativity, reality might be transformed.

Any communication between human bodies means that the nature of the moment continually changes: from sadness to joy,

from lament to celebration, from seriousness to humour. When everything becomes too intense, people might move back to the edges and allow their own sorrow or joy to be poured into the space they have created, the place of thoughts, hopes and memories. The way we seek to express our sense of loss and what we value will move us towards the overflowing silence, towards what can never be known, towards the peace that comes with not needing to know. Silence, emptiness, uncertainty will be celebrated rather than feared ... and food will be quietly shared.

Now, I realise that the possibility of all this *actually, physically happening* is fairly remote, but if it takes place in our minds, in our dreams, then that's something! The sharing space is a dream-time. It's how we feel, as well as what we do. It might be seen as waiting upon life.

This isn't about worship seen as meeting God or finding God or even praising God (for the concept of a God who continually needs to be praised raises its own questions) but about coming to an understanding of living which arises from experience, perception, looking, seeing, understanding, thinking and memory ... walking *humbly with* our God, no more, no less ...

In this way, we would really be paying attention (that greatest form of generosity), both individually and as a group, to what is happening in our church, our community, our country, our world. We would ask difficult questions and go on asking them. An eyes-open approach might begin with the need to lament ... and move from there to hope ... and then to speaking out. We know that there are too many good people keeping quiet just now.

We need to be prepared to ask questions that are not academic or scientific or logical but personal. We need to be prepared to make fools of ourselves! There may be no answers, but often change depends on the questions we ask.

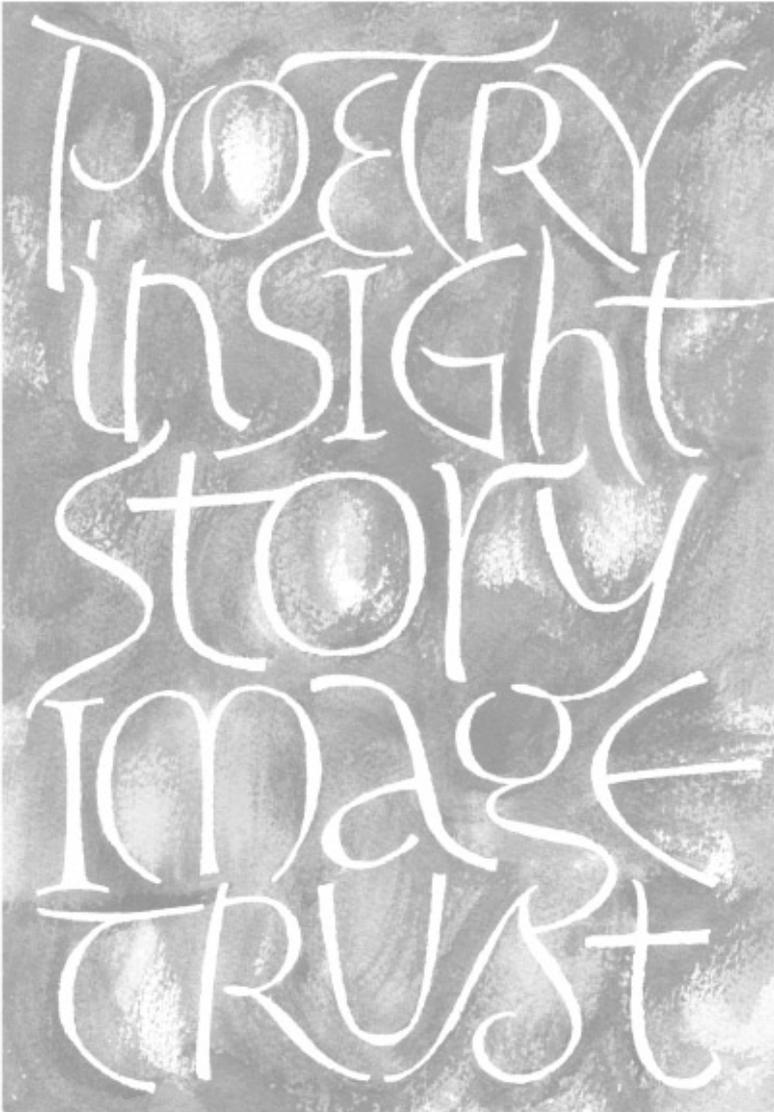
This book has three sections containing various writings

around the knowledge/wisdom theme: how we come to know, how we understand, how we live with our unknowing and our uncertainty. I had already written several *What I know about ...* poems and for a long time I've thought about seeds and seed-saving. Now I'm beginning to make the connections: the poet as seed-sower/seed-saver; the way we come upon knowledge, which is not about accumulation of information but something much more organic – nebulous, mysterious even, saved, shared and passed on, and at one with the intricate dance of earth, air, fire, water.

There are three sections with one theme but slight variations. You will see that they overlap. That's inevitable. The poems and pieces could be interchangeable – the sections interact. It's how you read that will matter. Each section contains what might look like (but isn't!) a random selection of poetry, reflection, liturgy, stories and articles. The introductions to sections won't necessarily refer in any detail to the pieces and poems but will give an idea of what they are trying to do.

I hope you will be led to think about what words, actions, gifts, concerns and other attributes you might bring to the sacred space, and what the space means, not as a gathering set aside from day-to-day activity but as people together understanding the wonder of ordinary life and how to share it. The authority – if that is the right word – is yours and mine.

part one



looking

poetry

like the flight of a bird
caught in the sunlight
then disappearing into the trees:
something seen and re-created
made known
for always.

looking

What we most remember of life is its poetry and we, rather than canon-makers or theologians, determine the relationship between our ordinary day-to-day living and what we attempt to express in poetry (or theology). What, after all, is the point of art or tradition if it silences new experiences ... if it silences *my* experience ...?

Poetry has the power to dignify the everyday things and the ordinary people of our lives. The authority of the poet is to show significance, value, beauty; to show how a thing makes its own importance. We are surrounded by objects and imagery. What we put on the walls of our homes, our churches, the images we use in our public places, our sacred spaces, matter. We live by imagery and imagination. Images are not ornaments. Like language itself they make our lives. The objects in a room can be instructive if *we* give them meaning, if we absorb into a new understanding the wisdom of tradition and older learning. Nothing is fixed and unchangeable. We must go to the past with the same ability to see and listen as we approach the present.

So let's begin with particulars, even what might be seen as sentimental or mundane. Mother's necklace, the pen on my desk, grandfather's cap, a child's first shoes, a book left on a bench, the sounds of the washing machine, morning sun on the bricks of home, the feel of the new beech leaves, the touch of a peach on your tongue, the warm glow of wood, picnics and pies, cow parsley, the scent of warm grass, the red of strawberries, the sound of a ringing rock, windblown summer chairs, washing lines – and connections between things: a stone and an abbey, a web and a friendship, peace and a prehistoric settlement, a boat and death, scissors and the trade union movement. Things together make our lives. They tell who we are.

Poetry isn't ideas; it's experiences. On the whole, abstractions don't make for vivid poetic writing. Try to write about the meaning of life and you're likely to come up against a stone wall. Write about a stone wall and you might just touch upon the meaning of life. To write, tell, express in whatever medium you choose can't be abstract. It must be grounded. If you think you *know* before you *look* then you won't *see*.

Isn't it one of the great cruelties of Alzheimer's that it's things that are lost? The nouns die first. Things, as in a memory box, are the way into our stories: all the colours of all the seasons of our lives will be in our minds, understood through memories.

To be human is to know through our senses, through the body and its immediate horizon, when the small world and the epic world become inseparable in a remaking of poetry and theology: a home place of body and mind. 'Home' is when you 'know' a place with all your being through its constituent parts: fields of grass, trees and tracks, distinctive buildings, particular places and plants, the smell left in a coat. Home is the moment you live in fully. Telling your story – the particulars of place and time, the insight and intimacy of everyday objects and actions – this is homecoming.

Jesus, you might remember, liked things – coins and clay, bread and boats, fish and fruits – and the people around them: carpenters and children, fishermen, farmers and food-servers.

So much is about small things and little occasions, about smells, colours, sounds, touch and the looking and the love that make them significant.

what i know about place

is that when Iona Abbey was a ruin
sea spleenwort took root on the south wall
above the choir where it can't be missed.

The wall is no longer exposed
to sun, sky, rain or sea salt wind,
but the sea spleenwort continues
to grow, to thrive

to know its place and time
remarkably well.

feet on the ground

When my first grandchild, William, was born, the midwife said that he had the biggest feet she had ever seen on a newborn baby. I recognised the size and shape of those feet – I could see that he belonged! He will, I hope, have those distinctive feet set firmly, but lightly, on the earth – sure-footed in the ground of his own understanding.

Elizabeth, my daughter, and I took William to visit his great-grandmother who was in her nineties. It was a moving experience – the look of pure wonder and delight in her eyes matched that in William's. There was a sense of resurrection. Faced with a new beginning, new growing life, she seemed young again. Hope – the tomorrow she wouldn't see – was there in her arms and she was part of it.

Rootedness, belonging, hope – all there in the Christmas story, as down to earth as you can get. Angels, kings, shepherds and animals all play their part in reminding us of the wonder, mystery and earthiness of new life.

I remember a minister friend, annoyed, telling me that a crying baby had interrupted his carol service. That wasn't an interruption, I thought, that was the flesh and blood heart of the service. So I have never been able to get my mind around that line in *Away in a Manger*: 'Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes'.

The Christmas story roots us firmly in this world: the baby in the manger comes into the world of the here and now, the daily fight against dirt, the daily struggle for food, water and shelter, the daily confrontation with sickness and death ... a world of power struggles and tyranny ... but also a world of beauty and wonder where life is given, sustained and handed on.

Incarnation is a good word. It's about the glory and holiness of flesh and blood, about how we value life. The same question

asked in the Christmas story is asked for every baby born: 'What will this child be?'

We understand most things on our bodies first: remember the wordless communication between my grandson and his great-grandmother; remember that lovely line from Christina Rossetti's carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*: 'But only his mother/In her maiden bliss/Worshipped the beloved/With a kiss.' Then we begin to make sense of what we feel, or perhaps we just rest with the mystery. When Mary's baby was born, she pondered things in her heart – she didn't write a book of theology.

'Listen, I will unfold a mystery' – Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:51 – is still a powerful message: that we can love – and go on loving against the greatest odds, beyond all reason. That is the light that shines in the dark days of December.

Do you remember that scene in *Only Fools and Horses* when Del Boy's baby is born. He holds the child up to show Rodney. 'What is it?' Rodney asks. Del Boy, with a look of wonder, mystery and pure joy, says, 'It's a li'l baby.' If you understand that then you're beginning to understand what Christmas is about. Don't let anyone tell you different.

christmas child

December dark, and what awaits
our attempts at imagery
is not to be found
in the unmaking
of any ice-cold metaphor
but is an ecstasy, a beginning
of thought, released
by a light we cherish
in the eyes of every child
newborn.