

Some Reflections on the of Filaments

Some two years ago—I can't recall the precise date—I hit upon the term “filament.” Most likely it came up in a discussion with a friend or two, but I'm not exactly certain about that either. Anyway, the term hit a cord and stuck ever since. At the time I had jotted down some thoughts and shared the idea with a wider variety of people who liked it immediately. This made me pursue the insight further. If it had remained personal without some broader echo or sympathy, I probably would have dropped the idea altogether. This wider basis of support led me to write down some tentative reflections, hence this essay which includes a fairly extensive supplement of texts from some personal favorites: Cicero, Gregory the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Henry David Thoreau. These excerpts center around both the night sky and sunset as images which evoke something mysterious both within and beyond our reach. In other words, they are intended to round out my own reflections. Actually, the notion of a filament has been floating around in my mind for some time. Always I have loved rising well before dawn and for a long time wished to record something about this special time of day. I believe the qualities of a filament (to be described in the next paragraph) have their roots in the early morning hours which bestows life and meaning to the rest of the day's events, hence the list of quotes from the just mentioned authors.

The dictionary defines a filament as a thin thread-like object, the most common example being found in light bulbs we use around the house. This arc-like strand is resistant to heat yet able to conduct it and is so bright that we are unable to look at it directly. Actually, a filament is the heart of a light bulb. To catch a quick glimpse of the filament before its presence fades from visibility we need to shut off the light. A filament can apply to astronomy, namely, streams of fiery energy which emanate many miles from the sun's surface and then arc back to the sun. In brief, the physical definition of a filament connotes thinness and the capacity to both withstand and to conduct high temperatures. Perhaps just as important, a filament suggests connectivity—again, the arc in a common light bulb. Therefore a filament has basis in science—hard, physical evidence—yet suggests something more. This runs parallel to another concern which emerges in this essay: the need to back up a personal insight with some foundation in science in order to construct analogies and metaphors. These, in turn, may be placed at the service of delineating hard-to-describe realms of human experience which escape scientific gaze and definition.

Anyone inclined to things spiritual seeks to bridge what traditionally has been perceived as a gap between the created and uncreated realities. In a nutshell, this disposition sums up the essence of every legitimate religious endeavor. People have an inbuilt dissatisfaction with the created sphere which keeps them constantly uneasy even if they are successful in life and possess everything they've ever desired. Ecclesiastes' clarion call of “vanity of vanity, all is vanity” mirrors this basic human dissatisfaction through the ebb and flow of natural cycles. The more Ecclesiastes perceives the repetitious, never-ending nature of these cycles the greater is his weariness with human vanity. Unlike most of us modern day people, Ecclesiastes does not cave in to despair, for he knows that everything and everyone can trace their source to God. “Vanity” isn't an end unto itself but a vital stepping-stone, even if a painful one. For example, the early Fathers of the Church saw the Book of Ecclesiastes as the first of three steps in an ascending hierarchy followed by the Book of Proverbs and the Song of Songs. Proverbs is intended to teach the disciple how to comport himself according to divine wisdom after perceiving the vanity of human endeavors. From there, the Song of Songs is the final stage or culmination of our endeavor to achieve union with God.

All this is fine and well. However, some “report from the field” concerning these matters might be helpful. Instead of a theoretical approach, it's best to talk about how insight into the filaments—indeed,

the very concept itself—arose from both personal and collective experience. Because use of this term may be unfamiliar with most people, over the next several paragraphs I will describe impediments to its awareness. This is important when dealing with such a delicate and subtle reality connecting heaven and earth. Don't forget. The filaments are very thin and long, in constant danger of being snapped. As another friend noted in this regard, "The filaments are fickle." Of course, the connectors between heaven and earth are not subject to our control. Still, it's helpful to put the matter in mythological terms for greater flexibility and ease of comprehension.

The context in which I am setting forth my observations is the monastic tradition which presupposes some acquaintance with Ecclesiastes' famous call of "vanity." It's essential to start off with that familiar division between the realm of sense perception and what we call spiritual reality. Not only this, but "vanity" is coupled with other elements of the Christian tradition. Many people aren't sensitive to such insights...not because they are disinclined but are overwhelmed with the pace of modern society. Indeed, many visitors who frequent our monastery turn out to be quite "advanced" in that they have—consciously or unconsciously—hit up and developed a sensitivity towards things spiritual. They find the monastery and its inhabitants symbolic of what's going on within them even if they can't find the right words. On the other hand, monks reside in a kind of hot-house environment—deliberately so—as set apart from the normal demands of society. Our strength is collective as opposed to individual. You could say that monks are freed up from normal societal demands and have that leisure necessary for a more in depth pursuit of what other people can only dream of. Yes, the role of leisure is perhaps the monk's greatest treasure, and visitors partake of it in limited fashion when they go on retreat.

Like any mode of life there the monastic one has invisible currents, some of which point to a facet of spirituality you don't hear discussed much. The one I have in mind is characterized by a fairly constant repetition of basic tenets of the faith which can, by reason of this repetition spread out over a lifetime, can dull one to the message being heralded. Take the Church's proclamation of the Gospel and the Word of God in general. Next, put this within its natural setting, the liturgy, which yearly proclaims various mysteries pertaining to Jesus Christ. The basic pattern of proclamation consists of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and finally, Ordinary Time. Although each season has its own character which fits in neatly with the four natural seasons, all have in common the idea of proclamation. After all, that's what the Church is about, to proclaim the Good News. When you're living in a monastery where this proclamation isn't confined to the Mass but spread out through the Divine Office (celebrated seven times daily), a monk is bound to take a different tack than the average Sunday goer. He has too.

The monk constantly is exposed to this proclamation, wonderful in and by itself yet containing unique problems when spread out over a lifetime. Two of them which aren't the subject of much investigation are: 1) the monk consciously or unconsciously is comparing himself with an ideal—sin is often thrown in, which complicates matters more—and 2) he is living much longer than his predecessors. Thus the monk is exposed to liturgical proclamation maybe twice as long as they; not only that, it occurs seven times each day, year after year. In other words, this lengthy life span was inconceivable when virtually all major theological and spiritual texts were composed. The Old and New Testaments are no exception. These documents pretty much presupposed that people lived to a maximum forty years, more or less. Nowadays people are just getting underway with a second career or even another marriage at that age. Sometimes I wonder if the authors of the New Testament, for example, would have approached the matter differently if the life span at the time reached into the 70s and beyond. If we carry this idea further, we could say that spirituality is meant to be practiced over a short period of time. After that, it's terra incognita.

I've mentioned these two points because they can become obstacles as to how we think about the filaments or become aware of their presence. Again, keep in mind that the term "filament" is used mythologically as a connector between two disparate realities, heaven and earth. Certainly the Church's proclamation of Jesus Christ through her liturgy will always retain the ability to inspire people, yet constant exposure to it runs the risk of dulling one's attention. This is applicable to monks who remain in a fixed or stable environment, quite unique in this world of mobility. For this reason monasticism runs a greater risk of being out of touch with society. It has always been so—deliberately—but I am speaking about a mode of life carried out in one place over a very long time, probably part of the reason why vocations have fallen off. Yes, monasteries continue to receive young men but at a trickle compared with days gone by. Those who do enter usually have more experience out in the world and tend to join later in life, say, in their early thirty's through early forty's. This fact is interesting in light of our considerably longer life span noted above. Candidates instinctively feel that monastic life isn't something you assume fresh out of high school as had been the case until approximately thirty years ago when early entry was pretty much the norm. Then there had been a fairly seamless transition from a traditional parochial school environment to the monastery. To step into the monastery was not entirely unlike stepping across the hall to a higher grade, all within the same school building.

Another factor which can hinder sensitivity to the idea of filaments or those connectors between heaven and earth is that monks live with basically the same population. It's not unlike married life, the major difference being that in a monastery one is married not to a single spouse but to a whole bunch of them...a kind of extended family. Being with a stable population over an extended period allows for each monk to know the strengths and weaknesses of the other. There's no hiding this fact. At the same time one can "hide" from the community right out there in the open by a more or less subtle psychological withdrawal. This withdrawal is re-enforced with barriers erected through confrontations with personalities contrary to one's own. Again, this happens over a period of time and can be more intense compared with other forms of society where greater interaction happens.

As noted several paragraphs above, people sensitive to things spiritual are inclined to posit a distinction between their transcendental experience and regular life, of being in the body with all that entails. Theoretically this distinction is artificial, a product of our own minds and cultural conditioning. Perhaps in less hectic times going back and forth between the two realms was more normal; that is to say, people were more accustomed to shift from contemplative prayer to activity and visa versa even if they lacked the ability to articulate their experience. Nowadays the distinction is sharper than in the past simply because of the accelerated pace of modern life and our exposure to media which is getting more vulgar. Apart from this obvious fact, monks have always found much of what society has to offer as distracting, even good things: a comfortable home, family and respectable work. They sought isolated places either individually or communally, the first impulse being one of flight which often appeared abnormal to their contemporaries...shades of Ecclesiastes' "vanity." With an extended life span much beyond our recent predecessors, perhaps this venture need not last for a life time which continues to remain the norm for monastic orders. It seems that we have to come up with deeper insights not only to get people into the monastery but to motivate those already there to continue living the way they do. It was easier then to undertake an ascetic discipline, for people knew they had a short time to live. Now we are starting out, as it were, when these people would have been on their death beds. Because of this, the motives of staying out in the desert—symbolically speaking, for the desert can be in the midst of a busy city—have to be re-examined because this experience is uniquely modern and was beyond the ken of our monastic predecessors.

These hindrances are one side of the story but are necessary to mention before discussing the real benefits of monastic life. It offers a unique opportunity of maintaining sensitivity to the filaments which makes the passage of time...decades in the monastery...pass more quickly than if one were living in society. Because a newcomer to monastic life brings his past along with him, he isn't able to appreciate the filaments' role until he attains that second half of his career. This is the point when he is becoming a monk "for the second time around" or that point when his illustrious predecessors have passed off the scene. We cannot rely upon the experience of old monks from the past; they still were very much in line with the society from which they came despite their separation from it. Compared with them, take a monk who entered around the time of the Second Vatican Council. He has seen more change than older monks who've served fifty plus years and will continue to see more of it well in to the future. Clearly this "second half" of one's monastic career is unexplored and exciting, really.

All forms of monasticism—Christian, Buddhist, Hindu—have as their chief characteristic rising early or well before sunrise. This cuts across religious and doctrinal lines and is the single common denominator which makes a monk different from other forms of religious life. Monks from other traditions who have visited us seem endowed with an inbuilt mechanism which acknowledges this reality. It's almost as though they can spot a fellow early riser right across any culture or tradition. The phenomenon isn't confined to monks who function as archetypes, if you will, or specialists performing a certain function in the Church. Just about everyone appreciates the special nature of predawn hours, yet given the nature of modern secular life, people tend to stay up late. Evening is one end of the spectrum, the other being when they get up and are pre-occupied with rushing off to work in the morning, the other end of the spectrum. You also hear of people savoring their commute to work, a time of solitude, which hasn't been tainted by the pressing demands lying ahead. Monks have the luxury of rising well before sunrise even if it means going to bed around eight in the evening as in Cistercian monasteries; at this time most people are stepping out or tuning into their favorite television programs. The sacrifice looks big from the outside but in actuality is small because it pays huge dividends the next day. So if anyone would like to know the essence of what it's like to be a monk, get up early, well before dawn, and resist the temptation of going back to bed. I offer an illustration from a former abbot who from an Orthodox theologian where the monk is compared to professional pianist. "If I forget my practice for one day, I notice the difference. If I forget it for two days, the critics take note. If I forget it for three days, the audience notices it." Many monks will say that if they sleep late—and late can mean 5.30 am—the ensuing day is not quite the same. Something indefinable is missing even if the day's activities remain pretty much the same as when the monk rises at three for Vigils. While people may express astonishment at such an ungodly hour, habit makes it easier. Keep in mind that the monastery is a small city. When everyone rises at three in the morning, almost you feel that everyone else in the world is doing the same thing.

Another important feature to getting up early is that monks assemble in church for the Office of Vigils which lasts approximately forty minutes. It consists of an introductory hymn, recitation of psalms and two readings followed by a concluding prayer. While many monks admit that they are distracted during Vigils, there's a subtle difference even if you rise at three and do not attend Vigils but say some prayers on your own. In other words, the communal nature of both rising early and gathering in church are part of the monastic way of life; it isn't the only way to God, just the context from which I am writing. Here the church in miniature is praising God while the church at large is at sleep. Being with the miniature church (physically) and the larger one (spiritually) enables you to fend off those distractions which assault you continuously because you have made a fairly quick transition from sound sleep to being at Vigils.

A monk's routine is quite mundane. There is no apostolic activity, so we're left with the task of making

enough money to keep the place running, activities you'd find in any household. Such lack of goals, if you will, is another way of setting monasticism apart from other forms of religious life. Furthermore, a good beginning in any mode of life makes all the difference. With us, Vigils and the time afterwards until daybreak endows prayer in common with special mystery symbolized by the rising of the sun which traditionally is associated with Christ's resurrection from the dead. Another aspect of this symbolism is that much activity in an abbey takes place at night or in darkness. For example, the winter months here in central New England can be quite long. The span of winter effectively starts in late September and terminates in late April. That means that not only Vigils but Vespers and Compline are done in either complete darkness or during twilight, the latter two occurring at the other end of the day. A monk attends Vigils with his brothers, afterwards has breakfast and washes up. Thus he has at his disposal approximately two hours before Lauds and Mass at 7 am. Again, keep in mind that for the bulk of any given year this activity is carried out in the dark; only at the height of summer can it be said that a harmony exists between nature waking up while the monks are finishing Vigils. That time is roughly just after 4 am. Even this period doesn't last long, from the end of May through the first or second week of July. Therefore darkness and the nocturnal character of Vigils during this period have a different slant compared with other times of the year. Regardless of the season when monks are going about their nocturnal activities, chances are they are aware of those in society who either are just going to bed after a day's work or a night's entertainment or more so, those persons struggling alone in the night with all sorts of problems.

A special boon we enjoy are our large cloister windows offering panoramic views of the landscape and sky. After Vigils the panorama lacks texture; it is the dead of night which I'm sure has a subtle affect on the monks after they have filed out of church. They know that they began Vigils during the night and have completed it during the night. Objectively speaking, night is night whether at 9 pm or 3 am, but the common assembly in church evokes those hours of the last watch before dawn. The panoramic view allows you even at a quick glance to drink in the starry sky's vastness with which the cloister itself seems in harmony. This penetration of the night into our monastery is especially noticeable when the weather is cold and sharp. It's especially enhanced with the moon's special beauty and all its phases.

Thus if you wish to discover the essence of monastic life you have to rise early in the morning. That's fine for starters but more is involved...staying up and not returning to bed. Generally monks will agree that their favorite time is not sunrise itself but that darkness preceding it. In fact, the Constitutions of the Cistercian Order prescribe getting up at the pre-dawn hours "to maintain the character of a night watch." This intimates that a monk has to retire fairly early—around 8 pm—just when many people are going out for a night on the town. An early retirement is natural, more or less in line with the setting of the sun. Also before the invention of electricity or for most of human history people went to bed as soon as it got dark. Experience reveals that it's easier to retire in winter when the sun has been down a few hours as opposed to summer when it's still light. Thus on one hand we have society's convention and on the other, the rhythm of the twenty-four hour cycle. All in all, a monk is offered a good seven to eight hours of sleep. It's the same as the amount of sleep other folks get.

The natural rhythm of a twenty-four hour cycle is so familiar that hardly we pause to reflect upon its significance. Although this cycle is seamless, we can posit a beginning to it, dawn itself. The freshness of dawn lasts for a brief time, lingers for an hour or so, after which the sun attains its apogee around noon. From then it's a gradual downhill slope until sunset. This downward momentum, if you will, continues throughout the evening hours which offer a counterpoint to those of dawn. They are two bookends set on each end of any given twenty-four hour cycle. The momentum of the sun's progression doesn't come to an end at sunset nor even during twilight which is a kind of in-between

state following a pattern inverse to its morning counterpart. Because this momentum is downwards—and again, I’m speaking mythically—it pass through the barrier of twilight yet has considerable energy to propel it forward. Considerably more time is required for the downward motion to terminate as will be spelled out a bit later. Twilight simply acts as a means to slow it down and make us realize that, yes, there is a clear difference between the two halves of the day.

Most people clearly perceive the downward momentum after high noon between three and four in the afternoon. By then they’ve had enough exposure to the day’s activities and look forward to their end. Still, sufficient daylight remains, and we get a growing sense that we’re about to make a change towards the night. This is a little examined interval of time often characterized by an ill-defined restlessness. We retain enough energy to carry on through yet are sufficiently tired—antsy may be a one way of putting it—and wish a break in order to get a grip on our restless feelings. Perhaps this is why the English invented Tea Time. Just a guess, but it seems to have some bearing on our discussion. Tea Time is far away enough from the noonday meal as well as supper, offering just the right break to get us through to the evening twilight. More importantly, Tea Time occurs at the furthest point away when the filaments begin to manifest themselves, that is, at 3 am. During this afternoon pause, it’s helpful to be aware of the two poles of the day...a much better time than the traditional dividers of midnight and noon. By “aware” I mean pausing to remember (as anamnesis, the making-present or realization of a past event) the filaments’ appearance. Such recollection involves inserting at this time the experience of the filaments some twelve hours in the future which is a counterpoise to twelve hours earlier. The filaments may be absent yet when we access our recollective faculty of anamnesis, they are almost as good as their presence. Since daylight had commenced some nine to ten hours earlier and we’re now towards its end, the accumulated affect of the day’s activity continues for a substantial amount of time after twilight which is why people don’t go to bed as soon as it gets dark.

On such is a twenty-four hour cycle we pattern our natural circadian rhythm. Mention of the mid afternoon Tea Time (and its American complement, the morning coffee break, which lacks the sophistication of the venerable English institution) are two further divisions. In other words, we manage to quarter the daylight hours. I wouldn’t want to break this pattern down further for two reasons. First, one half is appealing for obvious reasons (i.e., night and day = rest and activity). Secondly, the two subdivisions (morning coffee break and Tea Time), while of lesser importance, give structure to the daylight hours. Dividing anything into halves and then into quarters is a natural way of handling our lives. To push this further would run the risk of making our mythological schema into a technique and running the risk of manipulating time. If we apply this same principle to the nighttime hours, there comes to mind astrology which saw in the configuration of stars representations of our lives which supposedly affect human behavior. Perhaps astrology’s original insight was fine. Astrology got into trouble along the way when it became a technique for governing our lives and predicting the future.

Let’s take midnight as a logical convenient stopping point of that downward momentum which had commenced at sunrise. Midnight is the traditional dividing line between the old day and the new. Many places in the world use “military time” or “European time” to delineate a full twenty-four hour cycle. That’s fine, but I prefer the “American” system with its ante- and post-meridian because we get a sense of noon’s significance. It’s more amenable to the visible pattern of an analog clock as opposed to the abstract numeral one of a digital clock. We’re either “before” noon (am) or “after” noon (pm). The downward impetus, started some eighteen hours prior to midnight or at dawn, is very strong. So much so that after the initial barrier of evening twilight it continues to exhaust itself into the first two or three hours after midnight until finally coming to rest. Then it heads up again to begin another downward circuit. Close attention should be given to these last few hours of gentle downward motion;

better, to focus upon the point where the motion comes to a complete stop, halts a while and “somehow” switches over to an upward motion. I put this word in parentheses because somehow the post-midnight hours are crucial for putting our fingers on where the real distinction exists between day and night. Chronologically speaking, there is no pause with regards to the way each hour clicks by. Yet mythologically there is a big difference, and this difference is crucial to what I’m getting at here.

The alternation between day and night remains constant yet does have fluctuations. In winter the downward motion is less perceptible because of longer nights. In summer it’s less so, for there are fewer hours or intervals between complete night and complete daylight (towards dawn, that is). Ideally speaking, the spring and autumn solstice are when both the downward and upward motions are in perfect balance. We almost feel an impulse to erect monuments in order to celebrate their presence just like the ancients. If we don’t go this far, at least the beginnings of spring and autumn are days worth commemorating. I’m not sure, but perhaps these two days—around the twentieth of March and twentieth of September—are of equal length, day and night. A parallel to this are the beginnings of winter and summer, two extremes: one when nighttime and daytime have attained their respective maximums. Monuments to them have been erected, perhaps more numerous than those designating spring and autumn. Thus we end up with four commemorative periods in a given year which tie in neatly with the Church’s liturgical calendar, her own way of marking time. We are at that mythic barrier of the number four, secularly or religiously speaking. To pass beyond it could lead to a technique mentality, of trying to manipulate time which is not my intent. When you have two (as well as four by way of natural subdivisions) measurements of time like this overlapping in one place—recalling the modern scientific unity between space and time—you really have hit upon something unique. The best place to mark these events is, of course, a monastery. The former measurement (seasonal) gives form to our physical lives. The latter (liturgical) gives form to our spiritual nature. With this in mind, we might better be able to bridge that perceived gap between the two I mentioned early on.

The focus of this essay deals with trying to hone in on certain aspects of the twenty-four hour cycle...in other words, time. Less attention is given to its inseparable twin, space which could be the subject of another document. Nevertheless, the time which interests me is sacred by nature which naturally leads to sacred space. And the space where the filamental connection with time is made is the monastic environment *par excellence*. Saying which is more important—time or space—is like asking which comes first, the chicken or the egg. One way of putting it is that once you’ve become attuned to those pre-dawn hours for perceiving the filaments or connections between heaven and earth, automatically it lends a sense of the sacred to space. Perhaps you could start by favoring sacred space first, yet somehow time precede it, almost by a hair’s breadth. To spell this out better, consider not just the monastery but its church or any church. Certainly a church is a sacred space. Then again this space more or less sits there not doing anything until a time comes for the performance of a sacred rite. When the liturgy gets under way, both space and time form a unity which enables the people there to have an anamnesis, a recollection, of what it is all about.

By way of side note, I am reminded of an observation by Henry David Thoreau in his important though lesser known **Journal**. With regards to the alteration between sunrise and sunset, he favored the latter. Reason: it’s more mysterious for something to draw you (i.e., the setting sun) than to have something come towards you (i.e., the rising sun). Thus Thoreau’s **Journal** is chock full of amazing descriptions of sunsets, especially in the autumn and winter as opposed to spring and summer (cf. Supplement of Texts for a fairly exhaustive list from the **Journal**). I guess the former period offers a higher percentage of spectacular sunsets in that the sun is closer to the southern horizon and thereby subject to various hues. In the context of this document, Thoreau’s preference for sunsets may be aligned our

description of that downward flow of the sun's course resulting in its setting.

Monks begin their day at 3.30 am when the bell in the tower tolls signaling the beginning of Vigils. The office commences with a hymn followed by an alternation of Psalms by each side of choir. More specifically, the cantor intones a Psalm verse, "Oh Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise." He and the choir don't do this just once but three times as if to rouse the monks from their sleep. As for Vigils itself, the choir's back-and-forth rhythm imitates the one between day and night. It does so during those precious pre-dawn hours when the sun's course of the previous day had exhausted itself and is re-grouping for its upward swing. Thus the unfolding is a paradox: on one hand the passage of liturgical time with its own rhythm and on the other, natural time on the very threshold of becoming manifest when the sun appears on the eastern horizon. As for rising early, one could argue for getting up around midnight to 3 am or when one twenty-four hour cycle spills over into the next. That's fine, but this period consists of total darkness. It can be measured by watching the stars' rotation yet lacks the drama of sunrise. Ideally speaking, it would be great if monks could stay up the entire night, the reverse rhythm of normal folks. Even if a monk were to rise and pray on his own, it lacks punch when compared with Vigils done in common. The more people who are assembled to give testimony to this special time, the better they as a group. Yes, monks are specialists at this and find the deepest roots of their vocation during Vigils.

The rhythm just outlined is more complex than at first glance. We're so accustomed to the alteration of day and night, even in the monastery, that we seldom take a closer look. Let's take a novice or young man who recently joined the monastery. Anyone can do perform the normal monastic exercises, really, but even after a short while one realizes we're not talking about a job but a life style. Even rising when the world is asleep isn't as bad as it sounds because everyone in the monastery goes to bed the same time, not unlike an entire village turning in after dark. The very heart of monastic life consists of the two or so hours after Vigils, that is, until the Office of Lauds which dovetails with sunrise. No outsider witnesses this time; it's secret and hidden from sight just like the surrounding countryside under the shroud of night. Yes, some retreatants make their way over to the abbey church for Vigils but often crawl back into bed afterwards. Over the years I've noticed that the novice master who is in charge of newcomers have to spend considerable effort imparting the value of such an ungodly time. These men may know instinctively its significance but require insight through reading and prayer as to manage it. No small wonder that St. Benedict's **Rule** warns about the danger of monks going outside the church after Vigils and "engaging in idle talk." While such activity rarely if ever occurs today, Benedict correctly perceived a reluctance to have anything intrude upon the post-Vigil period. More precisely, the novitiate training centers around staying awake and not going back to bed, a time for contemplative prayer and *lectio divina*, the slow, meditative reading of Scripture. Since monks are left on their own after Vigils, they need to acquire inner motivation to take up these practices on their own and dovetail it with prayer either in their cells or in church. No one—not even the novice master—is around to hold you by the hand this time of day.

Everyone starts off with a desire to be in God's presence, however that may be understood. Practically speaking, most people find it impossible to constantly carry this out despite exhortations found in religious literature. It boils down more to an alteration between this presence (vague as we may perceive it to be) and being caught up in the affairs of life. Monks are no exception. Rarely do the two coincide in the sense that our activity becomes transparent to divine reality. For this reason the early morning hours are important because the atmosphere of pre-dawn is uncluttered. Just step outside and observe nature. Monks have at their disposal the Divine Office, for in the course of the day the intervals of communal prayer offer breaks to recall the time of Vigils. Officially speaking, this may not be the precise reason for the Office, but it's true from practical experience. Readily monks will admit

they're bombarded by a million distractions upon rising at 3 am. That's okay. Just the fact that they are gathered together for common prayer is a sign that a monk is on the right path. After all, he has the support of the community with him, even when alone in the post-Vigils hours.

In the concrete, a good way to set about bridging this traditional gap between God and the world is by examining how many times we find ourselves alone in a given day. It turns out to be more than we realize and can include intervals when we are walking from one place to another, washing up or eating. The same applies to being with people. Despite their presence, they don't preclude awareness of God. By "being with people" I mean the usual common back and forth exchange which doesn't require us to be fully present as is the case with more serious matters. If we further analyze these intermediate times, they can be opportunities to practice the divine presence...to carry over insight into filaments-as-connectors...without bothering ourselves about the details as to whether or not we enjoy this presence. Such attention resembles cement between bricks; the bricks represent normal attention whereas cement is that divine presence binding them together. Maybe with some consistency at this practice our perceived gap between "interval time" and activity can be bridged with greater efficiency.

A principle advantage of living in the monastery is that people are able to stand apart from society, slow down their lives and therefore be in tune with many things others can only catch glimpses of. The conscious option to become attuned to the alteration between day and night is a major step leading towards God's presence, albeit at first glance it seems indirect. Such indirectness has advantages, for it averts confrontations you'd normally run into when going at it head on. Day falling off into night is a natural way of watching...of beholding...how reality manifests itself, how it imparts information on a much deeper level. By taking this alteration as that which in-forms us—imparts its form, the most basic structure of information available to us—it can be expanded to include our deepest aspirations. This form has been outlined in terms of the sun's upward and downward course. In those "wee hours" after midnight it expends itself completely much like a wave that has crashed upon the shore and ends up as a minuscule curl of water on the beach. After that, the wavelet recedes back to the ocean and begins the task of growing all over again. Surely some monk somewhere and at some time in the distant past must have had insight into this twenty-four hour rhythm and saw it as representative of his life. Parallel to this are such disparate cultures as the Babylonians and the Aztecs, to name just two who have constructed elaborate methods for examining and charting the night sky. Virtually all were centered upon religion and secondarily were spin-offs related to cycles of planting and harvest. You get the impression that these folks must have been up all night and slept during the day. Persons belonging to a leisured class within these societies had the opportunity to engage in nocturnal activity, not unlike monks with their luxury of vigils and prayer.

The hours between three in the morning and daybreak are endowed with a special quality heralding the sun peeking over the horizon. Although it's still fully night, clearly this time is tending towards daylight. Everything seems on hold in order to catch breath before resuming a motion inverse to the downward movement of the sun's course from the preceding day. To appreciate this pause, position yourself by an eastward facing window about an hour prior to sunrise even if you're disinclined to rise at 3 am. Fortunately my monastic cell on the second floor faces towards the east, so I'm privileged to behold this wonder every day, that is, when the weather is clear. Even cloudy days convey a sense of transition albeit more subtly; because it isn't as evident as on clear mornings, I must be on the lookout more closely. Pushing this a bit further, we can imagine the sun approximately twenty to thirty degrees under the ground and towards the east prior to its emergence on the horizon because the earth is moving towards the sun, not the other way around. We can take this fact and see if it sheds light on our spiritual nature. Most people are not in a situation to be aware of this predawn time compared with the monastic horarium (schedule). A monk knows from experience that if he misses being a witness to the

dawn of a new day, the rest of his day won't be the same. One nice added touch to our holy hill here in central Massachusetts some one thousand feet above sea level is an almost panoramic 360 degree view from certain vantage points. If you can't get a full view, at least you can go to a particular cardinal point: east for sunrise and west for sunset; depending upon the season, the other two participate in them by reason of the sun's inclination. Our lofty position allows for seeing various towers on the horizon—I'm not sure what they are exactly—notably towards the east, south and west. I'd say that the most far-off one (west) is approximately fifteen-twenty miles distant. I like to focus on that tower (there are actually three close together) because the distance demands that you pay closer attention...atmospheric disturbances and the like. These blinking red lights are sentinels guarding the monastery's perimeter. Not long before daybreak their light fades out, and they are completely invisible during the daylight hours. The time when the blinking of these distant tower lights becomes invisible is difficult to nail down with precision. That makes them all the more intriguing and suggestive of the filaments...“fickle” as I had noted towards the beginning of this essay. Rather, we're the ones who are fickle in that perceiving the lights depends upon our mood, clarity of perception and so forth. These lights symbolize that the filaments are a type of signal which communicate information and that we who receive them require special sensitivity, especially when onset of daylight. In other words, a filament-as-signal doesn't speak to us in human fashion even though we'd like it to be so. A signal demands a receptor on the same wavelength and thus a discipline other than one we associate with other modes of communication, chief among them being verbal.

Predawn hours are neutral in that they stand midway between night and day yet partake of both, making their connection that much stronger and ours as well, provided on how well we're attuned to it. After all, such is the nature of the filaments, to make connections. Evidence for it isn't apparent right away; it takes some getting used to, of being attuned to the fact that your physical body is still in a sleep mode because of having risen at an early hour. Actually this torpor is beneficial in that it mirrors the pre-dawn hours. Because of their neutrality, these hours link the two halves. Another way of getting a handle on this is by contrasting it with evening twilight. There the sun, symbolic of the day's activity, weakens rapidly it passes into full night. Here the principle of mythology is valuable because it tells a story using observations from nature to depict a reality beyond our normal grasp. The neutrality of those predawn hours is the best time to perceive the filaments or connections between heaven and earth. At the beginning of this document I posited the chief characteristic of a filament as an ultra thin object which can form a bridge spanning a gap. For two objects to fully connect both must be at rest or run at the same speed. In addition, the objects must be lined up properly. This idea doesn't work with regard to the sun's downward course after high noon as it heads towards sunset. If we attempt to behold the filaments or connectors between heaven and earth in daytime and evening hours—not impossible but much more difficult—quickly we realize that the sun's downward rush is too hurried. This motion needs to be slow enough for us to notice before it makes an almost imperceptible switch to the opposite or upwards direction, that is, the switch from true night to the first presentiments of dawn. The sun in and by itself does not hinder our act of beholding the filaments; it's symbolic of our inner selves or our pre-occupation with daily affairs.

Because the filaments are concealed during the daylight hours, notably in the afternoon when our recollection of them is weakest, we can use this time as an opportunity to perceive them differently. They are blotted out by the sunlight, and we require faith in their presence by reason of recalling them (i.e., the operation of anamnesis) earlier in the day. At the same time always from noon through afternoon has been suggestive of temptation. Since this period is the exact opposite of the pre-dawn hours, our recollection of these ultra-thin threads—so subtle and ethereal—quickly can change into something like a spider web. Spider webs are true marvels of creation, just as delicate as the filaments and resemble them in many ways. However, there is one major difference. Despite its delicacy, a

spider web is extremely strong. It can capture a large insect and hold it as prey. Similarly, our recollections of the filaments can turn into webs comprised not of strands but of cables which entrap us. I'm attributing nothing sinister to the filaments nor to spider webs, only our recollective power which seems to be at its weakest point in the afternoon hours. Thus the value of Tea Time noted earlier which recognizes the vague but real unease which can occur several hours before sunset.

Obviously time's passage, of which the sun is the paramount witness, never ceases. Nevertheless, the hours from three in the morning to predawn are the "slowest" which mirrors our human condition. At this time we're in a more pensive mood because our bodies got up at an unnatural hour. Thus the predawn hours comprise a still point where the rush of time (we could also throw in "space") is at a minimum. The sleep from which we had just emerged stays with us and for some time afterwards keeps us in a certain restful mode. To jump into action right away would wrench us from this rest as anyone knows who does work at this hour instead of being at prayer. At the same time we are "pregnant" in that we are preparing ourselves to give birth to the activity lying before us. In addition to being a good time for gaining insights we'd never obtain at other hours, the stars help us to perceive the filaments. If the sky is clear overhead, right away we become aware of the heavenly bodies (and not infrequently, the moon) passing overhead in majestic fashion. Astronomy tells us that are stationary with respect to the earth, so as an alternative we may view ourselves on a ball racing eastwards while these luminaries are left behind or moving off towards the west. Darkness helps slow down our awareness of movement and time even though objectively speaking we zip along at the same clip during the day.

In light of this, I clearly recall one early morning stroll after Vigils in front of the church when the moon formed the tiniest sliver not far above the southeastern horizon. This image of the utmost delicacy made me think of the "harmony of the spheres," a harmony of music you can't hear unless attuned to it. Also I recall viewing the moon—mostly full or almost full—during daylight hours. It was clearly visible but lacked connection or nearness due to the sun's overwhelming presence. Regardless, I knew that the filaments were there for the taking, only they were more difficult to latch on to. At this point one may argue that we humans project our inner disposition onto natural phenomena. True, but instinctively we feel more is involved than a mere projection. Should we deny this harmony, often we end up more disconcerted, albeit vaguely, than if we hadn't been aware of it. In this instance returning to bed is a more desirable option. It is better to think of such images—moon, stars and so forth—as a physical way of making us recollect what's deepest in ourselves. The heavenly bodies (cf. **Scipio's Dream** below) partake in that process of anamnesis, a reminder in the truest sense that we recall a harmony often lost yet there for the taking. Instead of trying to imitate the sidereal harmony by recreating it—astrology again comes to mind—we are bidden to see it as an anamnesis of our true nature.

The world's literature is filled with references to the starry night sky, of how it is an image of eternity we intuitively realize as our true home. Almost simultaneously we feel that our life on earth is an exile. Such is the particular ambiance created by the predawn hours. At the same time we come away with a feeling that although both realms are so dissimilar, a hope remains they can be bridged. Perhaps this has something to do with being situated in between the just completed night—an image of eternity—and on the threshold of day—an image of temporality. A person may not be sensitive to this (let's say a late riser and what it symbolizes), but the experience is borne out by how we are affected by it later during the daylight hours. There comes to mind **Scipio's Dream** by Cicero which I had read last year. It forms a wonderful parallel to St. Benedict's vision recorded by Pope Saint Gregory (both this and the **Dream** are found in the Supplement of Texts below), of how he beheld the earth bathed in a single ray of light. The reports are captivating, especially if you have actually stood outside to behold the night sky. I don't think we should conceive the filaments as a cosmic puppet strings manipulated by God

from on high. Maybe their presence is more like the aurora borealis in northern climes. There they hang (“drape” is a better term) across the night sky and rustle—yes, that’s a good word, like curtains swaying in the wind. At the same time these mysterious lights change color. When dawn appears, the aurora borealis disappear. It might better to say they have gone into hiding from our sight, but nevertheless are hanging around up there.

The twenty-four hour cycle with its two grand halves of day and night clearly attests to our position on a sphere, that is, the earth. As ancient cosmological systems would have it, our planet is situated within another sphere, the heavens above. This image is out of date though retains viability for spiritual purposes. However, a subtle danger is present in that despite the beauty of a sphere, it isn’t quite the money for describing our human condition. Life is marked not so much by an alternation (reflected in that of day and night) or two halves of one sphere but is more like an ellipse. This oval shape, demonstrative of how reality really works, is a circle flattened either on top and bottom or on both sides. We can visualize ourselves located towards the left or right (top or bottom) or a bit eccentric to this ellipse: not eccentric in the conventional sense of being off center, for that intimates the image of a circle where our location would be off center as to the circumference. The image of an ellipse is appropriate because life is rarely black and white, night or day. It’s more like a twilight which combines both. If we view ourselves at one corner of an ellipse, on the earth circling the sun, the heavens above would arc out in a more lengthy fashion as it heads away from us. The same would apply to the arc (again, of equal length) on its way back. Most of our experience can thus be depicted as “twilight” and even complete darkness (the apogee from our location) with a fairly brief period of “brightness.” In other words, this brightness is when the heavens would curve more sharply around our location. As for the apogee just mentioned (i.e., complete darkness), likewise it is just as brief.

As a side note to the symbolic nature of those post-dawn hours, one of the so-called “little Hours” or Terce is celebrated at 10 am to commemorate the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles at Pentecost. The words of the opening hymn read, “It is the hour our souls possess with you full flood of holiness.” Terce is said pretty much like a morning coffee break, quite fast, just when we are fully engrossed in work. Objectively speaking, this is the least time you’d expect us to have the “full flood of holiness.” Perhaps Terce is a way, little appreciated, of wistfully dragging our that time just a few hours past (pre-dawn and dawn) when the filaments were in full bloom.

One way to bridge the gap of being in tune with the filaments—the harmony of the spheres—is by focusing upon the beginning of spring and autumn when we can more clearly observe day overtaking night and visa versa. Both are pretty much in balance as far as length of time goes. The time for perceiving it is between 5.30 and 6.30 am and lasts approximately forty-five minutes. When you sit facing towards the east (this is in the monastic context of after Vigils, around 4 am), it’s completely dark. Then less than an hour later you catch first glimpse of daylight streaking over the horizon followed by sunrise and creation coming to life. As late winter fades into spring, and the process advances until it attains its counterpart—through summer until it reaches an equal time span in mid September—this period favors sunrise and the time after it. On the opposite pole, passing from autumn into winter favors sunset and the afterwards. Regardless of spring or autumn, you get a more dramatic contrast between both sides of the horizon as opposed to the brightness of summer and the darkness of winter. Spring and autumn are “in between” the “full” ones of summer and winter, and their character is thus mixed. Still, spring and autumn presents us with a fairly good blend of pitch darkness and bright sunlight. They offer just the right amount of exposure, of how to incorporate our awareness of the filaments at the tail end of the preceding night and the onset of the coming day. If we wish to stretch this image further, consider high summer, each side of June 21. Here attentiveness towards the east is marked by the greatest amount of sunlight after dawn. When we settle down to watch, the birds

are just starting to chirp, for dim light has already appeared on the horizon towards the end of Vigils.

A friend of mine liked the image of filaments as connectors. He amplified it by visualizing himself swinging from filament to filament, almost Tarzan-like. Not a bad observation, for filaments aren't there just to contemplate but to actualize, to grasp hold of and enjoy. As I had said above, the filaments are fickle. We can't force their presence but get at them indirectly which is why the pre-dawn hours are important, a time when nature and most people are asleep. Once you get sight of a filament—and you have to be quick at it—we should resist the temptation of possessing it and turning into some kind of clever technique. Swinging from one filament to another is symbolic of greater freedom. Besides, it keeps in line with the aurora borealis noted above, how they elegantly drape and waver in the sky. Even when you lose sight of these “filamental” connections the image of gleefully swinging from one filament to another is enough to give heart. Despite evidence to the contrary, all is well. The connection between heaven and earth remains, and no further proof is necessary.

Expanding this insight to encompass the broader scope of history, we could say that the divine presence gradually becomes weakened starting from a primeval or idealized condition. For example, take any attempt to re-capture the experience of the Garden of Eden, that is, the bliss described in Genesis prior to the so-called “fall.” The story makes perfect sense in and by itself but gets watered down when we view the account in terms of history and to the detriment of its mythic sense. Also let's throw in the seven days of creation, the flood and so forth. We could say that the “In the beginning” of Genesis sets in motion the filaments as already discussed, the mysterious connections between heaven and earth. Not unexpectedly light comes into existence on the first day of creation. Thus Genesis is an accurate account of how the filaments—very thin at first such as in the six “days” of their creation—become thicker and heavier as each day of creation goes on. This trend towards increasing bulk is simply one way of understanding the narrative. Even better, the filaments become narrowed...more exclusive...in that Adam, Eve and their immediate descendants perceived them with diminishing clarity. One way of expanding this extraordinary story is to consider the lengthy life spans of the more immediate descendants of Adam and Eve. Over time this span decreases until it attains a state we'd call normal. Such is a sign of the gradual diminishment of God's immediate presence within the Garden of Eden. It remains fairly strong until really narrowing down in the classic biblical terms of dream, prophecy and prayer. Often we think of these revelations as special, out of the ordinary. Closer look reveals just the opposite because only special persons favored by God have at best these contacts in a very tentative fashion..

Several paragraphs above I alluded to the “harmony of the spheres” which can tie in nicely with these reflections upon the filaments. Both images can help bring a conclusion to this essay. There comes to mind a harp, lyre or similar stringed instrument whose thin and finely tuned strings resemble those of a filament as in a lightbulb. Such a musical instrument is made for plucking to elicit sound which then vibrates to and with other filaments on the scale. Thus we have a unity between the person plucking the instrument and listening to the sound. Such an image was familiar to the ancients and was carried over to Christianity. One text with which I am familiar is **The Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms** by St. Gregory of Nyssa (other passages are in the Supplement of Texts below). Here is an excerpt:

“The first true archetype is music, for harmony and concord adapts all things with respect to each other through an order, arrangement and system. The Maker of the universe works skillfully through his ineffable word of wisdom by those things which were always rooted in wisdom. If the entire world order is a kind of musical harmony whose artisan and creator is God as the Apostle says [Heb 11.10], then man is a microcosm, an imitator of him who made the world. The divine plan for the world at

large sees this image in what is small, for the part is indeed the same as the whole. Similarly, a piece of small, transparent stone reflects like a mirror the entire sun in the same way a small object reflects God's light. Thus I say that in the microcosm, man's nature, all the music of the universe is analogously seen in the whole through the particular inasmuch as the whole is contained by the particular. The structure of our body's organs follows this example, for nature has skillfully constructed it to produce music. Observe the tube-like structure of the windpipe and the harp of the palate where the tongue and mouth resemble a lyre with chord and plectrum." J.32-3

This passage is loaded with rich imagery, too much to dissect here. Suffice it to say that Gregory of Nyssa brings in another aspect from ancient philosophical tradition of his day, namely, cosmos, as mirroring a divine archetype. This archetype was perceived as a plan or as an architect but one with a richer connotation than we have today. A genuine unity was posited between the structure and originator; the latter doesn't make the universe and walk away, an image that some critics of Newtonian physics like to bash. The key idea here is man as microcosm of the macrocosm. From it flows other words within the same text: imitator, transparent stone, mirror, reflects and so forth. Gregory then applies the world order as musical harmony to our human physical constitution. Although we moderns may find this association unfamiliar, it has just as much validity as those mythic filaments presented in this essay to express that which is inexpressible.

Let's quickly add a few remarks about angels. They are important images in both the Old and New Testaments to demonstrate the existence of a reality intermediate between the purely divine and human (cf. Supplement of Texts below for two excerpts). Essentially they are messengers. Regardless of what one may think about them, angels tie in neatly with the thin, almost invisible nature of the filaments. Note that the angels invariably appear and depart with equal swiftness, almost before the people who encountered them realize what went on. The leading New Testament example is Gabriel who announced to the Virgin Mary Christ's birth. The brief dialogue between them concludes, like many others, with "And the angel departed from her" [Lk 1.38].

While I avoided personalizing the filaments, I equated them with the role of a signal. A signal—a human or some being greater than a human can stand behind them—transmits information not by language but by signs whose dense message needs to be unpacked gradually over time. Another famous example of angels can be found in Jacob's dream at Bethel (Genesis 28). "And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" [vs. 12]. St. Benedict in his **Rule** takes up this theme. What's interesting is the way he views Jacob's ladder as an image of our human constitution. While one side of the ladder is the body and the other is the soul, angels are ascending and descending upon the rungs between them. That is to say, the angels-as-filaments have been brought from their outward manifestation—the twenty-four hour cycle spoken so often above—to within our very selves.

I have noted the numerous pitfalls standing in way of our ability to perceive the filaments. St. Benedict presents the best remedy to get in harmony with them is the virtue of humility. Therefore permit me to conclude with an excerpt from the **Rule's** Chapter on Humility: "Hence, brethren, if we wish to reach the greatest height of humility, and speedily to arrive at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made in the present life by humility, then, mounting by our actions, we must erect the ladder which appeared to Jacob in his dream by means of which angels were shown to him ascending and descending. Without a doubt, we understand this ascending and descending to be nothing else but that we descend by pride and ascend by humility. The erected ladder, however, is our life in the present world, which, if the heart is humble, is by the Lord lifted up to heaven. For we say that our body and our soul are the two sides of this ladder; and into these sides the divine calling has inserted various

degrees of humility or discipline which we must mount.”

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Supplement of Texts

Gregory of Nyssa

(“J” refers to the critical text; “M” refers to the Migne text)

Inscriptions on the Psalms

The psalms’ teaching seems to be expressed through the understanding of many persons. What do I mean? I have heard that certain wise persons who have carefully examined our human nature say that man is a microcosm containing everything in the world at large. The order of the universe resembles a musical harmony of varied shapes and colors with a certain order and rhythm which is correct, proper and never dissonant, even if different parts differ greatly. J.31

In a similar manner, a skilled musician plucks the strings of his instrument and brings forth music by the interweaving of sounds. But if the musical voice were simple and unchanging, there would never be any melody. Thus the blending into a whole from various, separate elements in the universe through an ordered, constant rhythm results. It harmonizes all the parts and sings in all of them this supremely consonant melody. The mind becomes a hearer though in no way is it limited to this voice; rather, by surpassing corporeal senses and becoming heavenly, it perceives the celestial hymns. It seems to me that the great David perceived these things when he beheld the graceful, subtle of heavenly bodies and exclaimed that they proclaim the glory of God (Ps 18.2). J.31

The song of God's glory produced by such a rhythm and composed of every creature with different qualities is indeed transcendent. Stability and motion are opposites yet they are united in the nature of things. Any unity of contrary elements in them seems impossible and appears as stability in motion and perpetual movement in stability. Everything in the heavens is in constant motion, turns around a fixed point or has a reverse motion influenced by the planets. These bodies always have a connection based on identical elements; neither is anything new substituted for something else, but each body always remains the same and on its proper course. Hence, stability agrees with movement in an established order which is always a well-arranged musical harmony effecting a unified, ineffable hymn of God’s power embracing the universe. To me, a similar example is when the great David as an attentive listener said in one of his psalms (Ps 148.1) that all the other celestial powers praise God: the stars, sun and moon, the highest heavens and the waters above the heavens. David says that water is always present there, including everything else in creation. J.31-2

Since everything natural is compatible with nature, music too is in accord with our human nature. For this reason the great David combined his singing with his teaching on the virtues and sprinkled his lofty teachings with honey’s sweetness by which he carefully examines himself and cures our human nature. This cure is a harmonious life which to me the singing suggests through symbols. It appears as an exhortation to a higher state of life. There is no need for disharmony, being out of tune, any dissonance in persons with virtuous habits nor for an over-stretched chord because the harmony is broken when the chord is overtaut. On the other hand, the tone does not slacken into disharmony due to pleasure, for the soul which is puffed up with such affections as these becomes blunt and speechless. Likewise, all the other passions become strained with time and their tension slackens. We are considering these matters so that our way of life may always be melodious and in good rhythm, neither unduly lax nor strained

beyond our capacity. J.33

A song does not consist in the sound of its words as if the words themselves gave substance to the song and as if the rhythm is produced by the arrangement of the sung words, whether they be low, sharp, short or drawn out. But the song woven together with divine words has a plan and order, for its melody wishes to explain the sense of its words. By employing the voice's intensity, the sense lying within the [song's] words reveals as much as it can. The song thus resembles something edible, that is, a condiment or a seasoning to sweeten the nourishment of the [psalms'] teachings. J.34

The praise of God fulfilled in all the saints is summed up in the last psalm, "Praise the Lord in his saints" (Ps 150.1). The "firmament of his power" signifies [God's] immutable goodness, and the 'mighty acts of God' indicate that evil no longer dominates human nature. When human nature praises God's greatness, it does so not with a small utterance but praises him like a trumpet's loud sound. "Praise the Lord with the sound of the trumpet" because the varied, multiform virtues imitate the harmony of the universe while human nature acts as an instrument in rhythm with God's melody. The psalm designates this by the figurative symbols of a psaltery and a harp. Everything considered earthly, dumb and speechless joins the sound of its own chords to the great voice of the heavenly choruses. The stretched chords in such an instrument are steadfastness and immovability before evil in every virtue. The virtues unite the cymbal's pleasing harmony with chords when the sound of cymbals arouses our eagerness for the divine choir. To me this signifies the union of our nature with the angels. "Praise the Lord with the sound of cymbals." I understand this as the union of the angelic [nature] with the human when our human nature attains its original state and gives forth that sweet sound in union with others in thanksgiving. J.65-6

There was a time when only one choir with a spiritual nature existed which looked to one leader of the song and executed this song in accord with the harmony given by his command. Afterwards sin crept in and dissolved the divine harmony of the chorus. It brought about the fall of our first parents who had danced along with the angelic powers by tripping their feet by the slip of deception. Hence, man was deprived of unity with the angels because his fall had dissolved this unity. Fallen man needs to exert much toil and labor. By struggling against his fall, he might again rise to receive his rewards, the divine choir, the fruit of victory against his foe. J.86

Commentary on the Song of Songs

If we linger here a little on the Song, its contents may impart to us a lesson. The human soul has two natures: the incorporeal, intellectual and pure on the one hand; the bodily, material and irrational on the other. When the soul is purged of the gross habits of earthly life, it looks up through virtue to what is connatural and divine; it does not cease to search out and seek the origin of created reality, the source of its beauty from which springs the power whose wisdom is manifested in it. Wisdom moves all one's thoughts and capacity for investigation to grasp out of curiosity the object of one's search. Wisdom limits our comprehension of God and is the sole divine operation which descends to our mortal existence for the purpose of giving us life. Similarly, water moved by wind does not remain at the edge of the lake but becomes a spring gushing forth which rushes on high to its connatural state. Once it has passed the highest manifestation of water and becomes mixed with air, the wind's movement comes to rest on high. Such is the case with the soul seeking the divinity. Because the soul reaches from below to a knowledge of the transcendent and to a comprehension of God's wonderful works, it is unable to proceed further in curiously scrutinizing these works; rather, it marvels and worships him who alone is recognized by his works. The soul sees the heavenly beauty, the splendor of the luminaries, the swiftness of the earth turning on its axis, the good order of things, the harmony of the stars' course and

the yearly cycle with its four seasons. The earth is sustained by God who embraces it. He changes the functions of the stars above. He sustains the great variety of living beings: water creatures, birds, things on the earth such as plants and grasses, their quantities and differences and the properties of fruits and juices. All these manifest God's power. J.333-35

He is not only bridegroom but builder of the house; he is also in us as the house's architect and building material. He places a roof on the house and adorns this work with material which does not rot. Such material is cedar and cypress which resist rotting. Neither does it yield to time, beget moths nor is subject to corruption. The long cedar beams are used for the roof proper, while the cypress wood is used in the coffered work adorning the inner part of the house. The Song says, "The beams of our house are cedars, our paneling is of cypress" [1.17]. The hidden meanings signified by these words are clear to those following the sequence of the text. The Lord calls "rain" the various assaults of temptations in the Gospel. He says of a person who builds his house upon rock, "The rains came and the winds blew, and the floods came, and the house remained unshaken by such things" [Mt 7.25]. J.109

The lesson we can learn here is that we should not only cultivate virtue in an interior fashion, but we should not neglect our exterior good appearance. It is necessary to care for what is honorable before God and men [2Cor 5.11]; to let our good deeds be manifest to God and to persuade men and maintain a good reputation among "those outside" [1Tim 2.7]; to shine with works of light before men; and to conduct oneself becomingly towards "those outside." This is the "paneling" that comes from the good odor of Christ of which cypress is a symbol. It is skillfully wrought by a decent life. The wise architect Paul knew how to express such things in a becoming, harmonious manner: "Let all things among you be done decently and in order" [1Cor 14.40]. J.112

But this is not the object of our investigation, rather, our task is to consider diligently the diverse material before us and to see how wood is combined with gold, silver, purple and stones to construct a chariot. Even Paul the wise architect judges wood, along with grass and reeds, as worthless for constructing a house [1Cor 3.12] because it is consumed by fire's destructive power which proves the material. We know that wood does not endure but changes into gold, silver or anything else of value. The Apostle says [2Tim 2.20] that in the great house of God are vessels of gold and silver, hinting through these things at an incorporeal, spiritual creation. Wood and earthenware may signify for us what disobedience created and made into earthenware vessels; through wood, sin made us wooden vessels instead of golden ones. The use of vessels is determined by the material's worthiness, for while more worthy material is ordained for honorable purposes, the unworthy is cast aside for common use. But what does Paul say of these matters? By its own free choice, the vessel has the capacity to become either gold from wood or silver from clay. J.208

Thus the Apostle says "God has assigned to each respectively the gifts of the Holy Spirit" [Rom 12.3], and to each person the Spirit gives prophecy according to the proportion of his faith. To another person is bestowed a different function according to his nature and his ability to receive grace, whether as the eye of the Church's body, as a hand or as a prop instead of a foot. Thus in the chariot's construction one person is a column, another a step; still another is a rest for the head while others are designated for the litter's interior. J.208, continued

The architect does not intend all the elements used in decoration for one purpose but all parts are tastefully adorned, and the beauty of each part is intended to be different yet harmonious. Thus the litter's pillars are silver with a purple steep; the head support is made of gold on which the bridegroom reclines his head while the litter's interior is embellished with precious stones. The pillars may be

understood as belonging to the Church to which the Song's text carefully applies pure, fire-tried gold: they have ascended to the loftiness of the kingdom. J.210

Also from Gregory of Nyssa (**Song Commentary**), two excerpts concerning angels as noted at the conclusion of this essay:

After the resurrection we have been promised a life similar to the angels, and he who has promised it does not lie. It follows, therefore, the life in this world should be a preparation for the one we hope for later. Though living in the flesh and passing through the field of this world, we should not live according to the flesh nor be conformed to this world; rather, we ought to meditate on the life to come while we are still in this present one. Therefore by imposing an oath, the bride confirms those souls under instruction: while spending their lives in this "field," they will look to the "powers" and imitate their angelic purity by detachment. Love is aroused and wakened; that is to say, it is elevated and continually spurred on to greater growth. God's good will is done "on earth as it is in heaven" [Mt 6.10] when the detachment of the angels is effected in us. This is our understanding of "I have charged you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the powers and strengths of the field, that you do not rouse or awake my love until he pleases" [2.7]. If any other text should be found which brings us closer to the truth we seek, let us receive it as a grace and give thanks to him who reveals through the Holy Spirit the mysteries hidden in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory forever. Amen. J.135-6

While the bride went about all these places, she scrutinized the entire angelic rank. Not having seen him whom she sought among these good things, she reasoned with herself, "Can my beloved be comprehended? And she says to them, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?' " They kept silent, signifying that the one sought after is incomprehensible. After the bride passed throughout that transcendent city and did not perceive her love among immaterial and spiritual beings, she forsakes everything she has found. She realizes that her sought-after love is known only in her impossibility to comprehend his essence and that every sign becomes a hindrance to those who seek him. Therefore the bride says, " 'When I passed them by a little,' I left every creature and passed by every intelligible being in creation; having forsaken every manner of comprehension, I found my beloved by faith." J.182-3

Hexaemeron

For the divine voice wrote the exhortative words pertaining to the creation which Moses described; David said that [divine] wisdom had generated visible things. For this reason he exclaims that the heavens declare the glory of God [cf. Ps 18.2]; clearly visible things are revealed through a harmony of rotary motion which is accomplished by perfect knowledge, not by words. When saying that the heavens declare and the firmament announces, [David] informs his listeners who are of crasser understanding. Both the sound of a voice and clear word received from the declaration of the heavens do not contain any tongues nor words by which we might hear in order to show that wisdom is contemplated in creation which is the word, even though it may not be clear. Again, God's voice spoke to Moses by marvelous signs among the Egyptians which the more sublime words which the Psalm take up, "He placed his words among them and his signs in the land of Ham" [Ps 104.27]. This word created something marvelous, and clearly the psalm demonstrated that it is not the uttering of words but by signs of power which had been named. M.73

"God saw that the light was good and divided the light from the darkness" [Gen 1.4]. Again, this took place according to a necessary sequence of nature in a certain order and harmony through God's work to which Moses refers. He instructs us, I think, through words about God's wisdom which preordained

all things and which follow a determined order and sequence. For the nature of light is disseminated in everything to the production of what is natural; it gathers all to itself and fully obscures the rest of material elements under the cover of darkness. Therefore what is begotten according to sequence is not by chance nor from its own power, for Moses declared that God's power is responsible. But the nature of fire is sharp and ever mobile, a fact evident from visible reality. The narrative suggests through this principle [beginning] by a sequence which historically conforms to Moses' description, "And there was evening and there was morning" [Gen 1.4]. Who does not know that creation is twofold, one spiritual and the other perceptible, which the lawgiver presents at once? Moses does not refer to those things which the mind perceives, but he manifests them by visible reality to the senses which adorn them. M.76

Therefore the wise Moses does not speak as one versed in science about our natural and innate elements which nourish us from birth. When we hear his teaching on this, the innate, native aspect of our nature as it pertains to air and which is in accord with visible creation has been explained in detail. When the second day has passed, God's voice once again issues a command by a harmonious order where the water is separated from the earth. Truly wisdom, the word of God, brought everything into existence not through organs of voice, but it generates them through those marvels we can behold. When the earth is joined with anything moist, we get another quality. The earth became dense with its own qualities so that all parts contribute to being closely pressed and confined from its inherent moisture. How, then, can the water be separated from the earth and be gathered together in the bowels of the earth? This is possible through the divine power and wisdom. M.88

Scipio's Dream

(from a text on the Internet)

I served in Africa as military tribune of the Fourth Legion under Manius Manilius, as you know. When I arrived in that country my greatest desire was to meet King Masinissa, who had good reasons to be attached to my family. The old man embraced me tearfully when I called, and presently looked up to heaven and said, I thank thee sovereign sun, and ye lesser heavenly beings, that before I depart this life I behold in my realm and beneath my roof Publius Cornelius Scipio, whose very name refreshes my strength, so inseparable from my thought is the memory of that noble and invincible hero (Scipio Africanus, better known as Scipio the Elder, grandfather of Publius.) who first bore it." Then I questioned him about his kingdom, and he me about our commonwealth, and the day wore away with much conversation on both sides.

After I had been royally entertained we continued our conversation late into the night, the old man talking of nothing but Africanus and rehearsing his sayings as well as his deeds. When we parted to take our rest I fell into a deeper sleep than usual, for the hour was late and I was weary from travel. Because of our conversation, I suppose our thoughts and utterances by day produce an effect in our sleep like that which Ennius speaks of with reference to Homer, of whom he used frequently to think and speak in his waking hours—Africanus appeared to me, in the shape that was familiar to me from his bust rather than from his own person. I shuddered when I recognized him, but he said: "Courage, Scipio, lay aside your dread and imprint my words on your memory."

[Africanus foretells the brilliant military career Scipio has ahead, starting with the overthrow of Carthage, and that, by his own merit, he will also be called Africanus. After traversing Egypt, Syria, Asia and Greece, he will put an end to a great war; but upon his triumphant return to Rome will find the government thrown into confusion by the machinations of Tiberius Gracchus.] "And here, Africanus, you must display to your country the luster of your spirit, genius, and wisdom.

“But at this period I perceive that the path of your destiny is a doubtful one; for when your life has passed through seven times eight oblique journeys and returns of the sun; and when these two numbers (each of which is regarded as complete, one on one account and the other on another) shall, in their natural circuit, have brought you to the crisis of your fate, then will the whole state turn itself toward thee and thy glory; the senate, all virtuous men, our allies, and the Latins, shall look up to you. Upon your single person the preservation of your country will depend; and, in short, it is your part, as dictator, to settle the government, if you can but escape the impious hands of your kinsmen.”—Here, when Laelius uttered an exclamation, and the rest groaned with great excitement, Scipio said, with a gentle smile, “I beg that you will not waken me out of my dream; listen a few moments and hear what followed.”

“But that you may be more earnest in the defense of your country, know from me, that a certain place in heaven is assigned to all who have preserved, or assisted, or improved their country, where they are to enjoy an endless duration of happiness. For there is nothing which takes place on earth more acceptable to that Supreme Deity who governs all this world, than those councils and assemblies of men bound together by law, which are termed states; the governors and preservers of these go from hence, and hither do they return.” Here, frightened as I was, not so much from the dread of death as of the treachery of my friends, I nevertheless asked him whether my father Paulus, and others, whom we thought to be dead, were yet alive? “To be sure they are alive (replied Africanus), for they have escaped from the fetters of the body as from a prison; that which is called life is really death. But behold your father Paulus approaching you.”—No sooner did I see him than I poured forth a flood of tears; but he, embracing and kissing me, forbade me to weep. And when, having suppressed my tears, I regained the faculty of speech, I said: ‘Why, thou most sacred and excellent father, since this is life, as I hear Africanus affirm, why do I tarry on earth, and not hasten to come to you?’”

“Not so, my son,” he replied; “unless that God, whose temple is all this which you behold, shall free you from this imprisonment in the body, you can have no admission to this place; for men have been created under this condition, that they should keep that globe called earth which you see in the middle of this temple. And a soul has been supplied to them from those eternal fires which you call constellations and stars, and which, being globular and round, are animated with divine spirit, and complete their cycles and revolutions with amazing rapidity. Therefore you, my Publius, and all good men, must preserve your souls in the keeping of your bodies; nor are you, without the order of that Being who bestowed them upon you, to depart from mundane life, lest you seem to desert the duty assigned you by God. But, Scipio, like your grandfather here, like me who begot you, cherish justice and duty, a great obligation to parents and kin but greatest to your country. Such a life is the way to heaven and to this assembly of those who have already lived, and, released from the body, inhabit the place which you now see” (it was the circle of light which blazed most brightly among the other fires), “which you have learned from the Greeks to call the Milky Way.” And as I looked on every side I saw other things transcendently glorious and wonderful. There were stars which we never see from the earth, and all were vast beyond what we have ever imagined. The least was that farthest from heaven and nearest the earth which shone with a borrowed light. The starry spheres were much larger than the earth; the earth itself looked so small as to make me ashamed of our empire, which was a mere point on its surface.

As I gazed more intently on earth, Africanus said: “How long will your mind be fixed on the ground? Do you not see what lofty regions you have entered? These are the nine circles, or rather spheres, by which all things are held together. One, the outermost, is the celestial; it contains all the rest and is itself the Supreme God, holding and embracing within itself the other spheres. In this are fixed those

stars which ever roll in an unchanging course. Beneath it are seven other spheres which have a retrograde movement, opposite to that of the heavens. Of these, the globe which on earth you call Saturn, occupies one sphere. That shining body which you see next is called Jupiter, and is friendly and salutary to mankind. Next the lucid one, terrible to the earth, which you call Mars. The Sun holds the next place, almost under the middle region; he is the chief, the leader, and the director of the other luminaries; he is the soul and guide of the world, and of such immense bulk, that he illuminates and fills all other objects with his light. He is followed by the orbit of Venus, and that of Mercury, as attendants; and the Moon rolls in the lowest sphere, enlightened by the rays of the Sun. Below this there is nothing but what is mortal and transitory, excepting those souls which are given to the human race by the goodness of the gods. Whatever lies above the Moon is eternal. For the earth, which is the ninth sphere, and is placed in the center of the whole system, is immovable and below all the rest; and all bodies, by their natural gravitation, tend toward it.”

When I had recovered from my amazement at these things I asked, “What is this sound so strong and sweet that fills my ears?” “This,” he replied, “is the melody which, at intervals unequal, yet differing in exact proportions, is made by the impulse and motion of the spheres themselves, which, softening shriller by deeper tones, produce a diversity of regular harmonies. It is impossible that such prodigious movements should pass in silence; and nature teaches that the sounds which the spheres at one extremity utter must be sharp, and those on the other extremity must be grave; on which account that highest revolution of the star-studded heaven, whose motion is more rapid, is carried on with a sharp and quick sound; whereas this of the moon, which is situated the lowest and at the other extremity, moves with the gravest sound. For the earth, the ninth sphere, remaining motionless, abides invariably in the innermost position, occupying the central spot in the universe. But these eight revolutions, of which two, those of Mercury and Venus, are in unison, make seven distinct tones, with measured intervals between, and almost all things are arranged in sevens. Skilled men, copying this harmony with strings and voice, have opened for themselves a way back to this place, as have others who with excelling genius have cultivated divine sciences in human life. But the ears of men are deafened by being filled with this melody; you mortals have no duller sense than that of hearing. As where the Nile at the Falls of Catadupa pours down from lofty mountains, the people who live hard lack the sense of hearing because of the cataract's roar, so this harmony of the whole universe in its intensely rapid movement is so loud that men's ears cannot take it in, even as you cannot look directly at the sun, your sense of sight being overwhelmed by its radiance.”

While I marveled at these things I was ever and anon turning my eyes back to earth, upon which Africanus resumed: “I perceive that even now you are fixing your eyes on the habitation and abode of men, and if it seems to you diminutive, as it in fact is, keep your gaze fixed on these heavenly things and scorn the earthly. What fame can you obtain from the speech of men, what glory worth the seeking? You perceive that men dwell on but few and scanty portions of the earth, and that amid these spots, as it were, vast solitudes are interposed! As to those who inhabit the earth, not only are they so separated that no communication can circulate among them from the one to the other, but part lie upon one side, part upon another, and part are diametrically opposite to you, from whom you assuredly can expect no glory...all that part of the earth which is inhabited by you, which narrows toward the south and north but widens from east to west, is no other than a little island surrounded by that sea which on earth you call the Atlantic, sometimes the great sea, and sometimes the ocean; and yet with so grand a name, you see how diminutive it is! Now do you think it possible for your renown, or that of any one of us, to move from those cultivated and inhabited spots of ground, and pass beyond that Caucasus, or swim across yonder Ganges? What inhabitant of the other parts of the east, or of the extreme regions of the setting sun, of those tracts that run toward the south or toward the north, shall ever hear of your name? Now supposing them cut off, you see at once within what narrow limits your glory would fain

expand itself. As to those who speak of you, how long will they speak?

“Let me even suppose that a future race of men shall be desirous of transmitting to their posterity your renown or mine, as they received it from their fathers; yet when we consider the convulsions and conflagrations that must necessarily happen at some definite period, we are unable to attain not only to an eternal, but even to a lasting fame. Now of what consequence is it to you to be talked of by those who are born after you, and not by those who were born before you, who certainly were as numerous and more virtuous; especially, as amongst the very men who are thus to celebrate our renown, not a single one can preserve the recollections of a single year? For mankind ordinarily measure their year by the revolution of the sun, that is of a single heavenly body. But when all the planets shall return to the same position which they once had, and bring back after a long rotation the same aspect of the entire heavens, then the year may be said to be truly completed; I do not venture to say how many ages of mankind will be contained within such a year. As of old the sun seemed to be eclipsed and blotted out when the soul of Romulus entered these regions, so when the sun shall be again eclipsed in the same part of his course and at the same period of the year and day, with all the constellations and stars recalled to the point from which they started on their revolutions, then count the year as brought to a close. But be assured that the twentieth part of such a year has not yet elapsed.

“Consequently, should you renounce hope of returning to this place where eminent and excellent men find their reward, of what worth is that human glory which can scarcely extend to a small part of a single year? If, then, you shall determine to look on high and contemplate this mansion and eternal abode, you will neither give yourself to the gossip of the vulgar nor place your hope of well-being on rewards that man can bestow. Virtue herself, by her own charms, should draw you to true honor. What others may say of you regard as their concern, not yours. They will doubtless talk about you, but what they say is limited to the narrow regions which you see; nor does talk of anyone last into eternity—it is buried with those who die, and lost in oblivion for those who come afterward.” When he had finished I said: “Truly, Africanus, if the path to heaven lies open to those who have deserved well of their country, though from my childhood I have ever trod in your and my father’s footsteps without disgracing your glory, yet now, with so noble a prize set before me, I shall strive with much more diligence.”

“Do so strive,” replied he, “and do not consider yourself, but your body, to be mortal. For you are not the being which this corporeal figure evinces; but the soul of every man is the man, and not that form which may be delineated with a finger. Know also that you are a god, if a god is that which lives, perceives, remembers, foresees, and which rules, governs, and moves the body over which it is set, just as the Supreme God rules the universe. Just as the eternal God moves the universe, which is in part mortal, so does an everlasting soul move the corruptible body.

“That which is always in motion is eternal; but that which, while communicating motion to another, derives its own movement from some other source, must of necessity cease to live when this motion ends. Only what moves itself never ceases motion, for it is never deserted by itself; it is rather the source and first cause of motion in whatever else is moved. But the first cause has no beginning, for everything originates from the first cause; itself, from nothing. If it owed its origin to anything else, it would not be a first cause. If it has no beginning, it has no end. If a first cause is extinguished, it will neither be reborn from anything else, nor will it create anything else from itself, for everything must originate from a first cause. It follows that motion begins with that which is moved of itself, and that this can neither be born nor die—else the heavens must collapse and nature perish, possessing no force from which to receive the first impulse to motion.

“Since that which moves of itself is eternal, who can deny that the soul is endowed with this property?

Whatever is moved by external impulse is soulless; whatever possesses soul is moved by an inner impulse of its own, for this is the peculiar nature and property of soul. And since soul is the only force that moves itself, it surely has no beginning and is immortal. Employ it, therefore, in the noblest of pursuits; the noblest are those undertaken for the safety of your country. If it is in these that your soul is diligently exercised, it will have a swifter flight to this, its proper home and permanent abode. Even swifter will be the flight if, while still imprisoned in the body, it shall peer forth, and, contemplating what lies beyond, detach itself as far as possible from the body. For the souls of those who have surrendered themselves to the pleasures of the body and have become their slaves, who are goaded to obedience by lust and violate the laws of gods and men—such souls, when they pass out of their bodies, hover close to earth, and do not return to this place till they have been tossed about for many ages.

He departed; I awoke from sleep.

The Vision of St. Benedict

(Saint Gregory the Great: **Dialogues**, 2.35)

In speaking of their hopes and longings they (Benedict and the deacon Servandus) were able to taste in advance the heavenly food that was not yet fully theirs to enjoy. When it was time to retire for the night, Benedict went to his room on the second floor of the tower, leaving Servandus in the one below, which was connected with his own by a stairway. Their disciples slept in the large building facing the tower.

Long before the night office began, the man of God was standing at his window, where he watched and prayed while the rest were still asleep. In the dead of night he suddenly beheld a flood of light shining down from above more brilliant than the sun, and with it every trace of darkness cleared away. Another remarkable sight followed. According to his own description, the whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light. As he gazed at all this dazzling display, he saw the soul of Germanus, the Bishop of Capua, being carried by angels up to heaven in a ball of fire...

Keep this well in mind, Peter. All creation is bound to appear small to a soul that sees the Creator. Once it beholds a little of his light, it finds all creatures small indeed. The light of holy contemplation enlarges and expands the mind in God until it stands above the world. In fact, the soul that sees him rises even above itself, and as it is drawn upward in his light all its inner powers unfold. Then, when it looks down from above, it sees how small everything is that was beyond its grasp before.

Now, Peter, how else was it possible for this man to behold the ball of fire and watch the angels on their return to heaven except with light from God? Why should it surprise us, then, that he could see the whole world gathered up before him after this inner light had lifted him so far above the world? Of course, in saying that the world was gathered up before his eyes I do not mean that heaven and earth grew small, but that his spirit was enlarged. Absorbed as he was in God, it was now easy for him to see all that lay beneath God. In the light outside that was shining before his eyes, there was a brightness which reached into his mind and lifted his spirit heavenward, showing him the insignificance of all that lies below.

Excerpts Pertaining to Sunset from The Journal of Henry David Thoreau

These references are fairly exhaustive. While they don't speak of the filaments as presented in this document, nevertheless the sunset and how we perceive it forms an integral part of our being aware of

the filaments in that time after midnight and prior to dawn. In other words, sunset is a transition from full light to the full darkness of night. By reading how Thoreau perceives this time, we can get into a better mood for perceiving the filaments.

A mild summer sun shines over forest and lake. The earth looks as fair this morning as the Valhalla of the gods. Indeed our spirits never go beyond nature. In the woods there is an inexpressible happiness. Their mirth is but just repressed. December 13, 1841

There was a glorious lurid sunset tonight, accompanied with many sombre clouds, and when I looked into the west with my head turned, the grass had the same fresh green, and the distant herbage and foliage in the horizon the same dark blue, and the clouds and sky the same bright colors beautifully mingled and dissolving into one another, that I have seen in pictures of tropical landscapes and skies. July 16, 1850

Every sunset inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down. November 21, 1850

Who can foretell the sunset,—what it will be? January 10, 1851

It was a splendid sunset that day, a celestial light on all the land, so that all people went to their doors and windows to look on the grass and leaves and buildings and the sky, and it was equally glorious in whatever quarter you looked; a sort of fulgor as of stereotyped lightning filled the air. Of which this is my solution. August 8, 1851

As I returned through Hosmer's field, the sun was setting just beneath a black cloud by which it had been obscured, and as it had been a cold and windy afternoon, its light, which fell suddenly on some white pines between me and it, lighting them up like a shimmering fire, and also on the oak leaves and chestnut stems, was quite a circumstance. It was from the contrast between the dark and comfortless afternoon and this bright and cheerful light, almost fire. The eastern hills and woods, too, were clothed in a still golden light. The light of the setting sun, just emerged from a cloud and suddenly falling on and lighting up the needles of the white pine between you and it, after a raw and luring afternoon near the beginning of winter, is a memorable phenomenon. A sort of Indian summer in the day. November 22, 1851

When returning between Bear Hill and the railroad, the sun had set and there was a very clear amber light in the west, and, turning about, we were surprised at the darkness in the east, the crescent of night, almost as if the air were thick, a thick snow-storm were gathering, which, as we had faced the west, we were not prepared for; yet the air was clear. That kind of sunset which I witnessed on Saturday and Sunday is perhaps peculiar to the late autumn. November 25, 1851

Tonight, as so many nights within the year, the clouds arrange themselves in the east at sunset in long converging bars, according to the simple tactics of the sky. It is the melon-rind jig. It would serve for a permanent description of the sunset. Such is the morning and such the evening, converging bars inclose the day at each end as within a melon rind, and the morning and evening are one day. Long after the sun has set, and downy clouds have turned dark, and the shades of night have taken possession of the east, some rosy clouds will be seen in the upper sky over the portals of the darkening west. December 21, 1851

By half past three the sun is fairly out. I go to the Cliffs. There is a narrow ridge of snow, a white line,

on the storm side of the stem of every exposed tree. I see that there is to be a fine, clear sunset, and make myself a seat in the snow on the Cliff to witness it. Already a few clouds are glowing like a golden sierra just above the horizon. From a low arch the clear sky has rapidly spread eastward over the whole heavens, and the sun shines serenely, and the air is still, and the spotless snow covers the fields. The snow-storm is over, the clouds have departed, the sun shines serenely, the air is still, a pure and trackless white napkin covers the ground, and a fair evening is coming to conclude all. Gradually the sun sinks, the air grows more dusky, and I perceive that if it were not for the light reflected from the snow it would be quite dark...Now the sun has quite disappeared, but the afterglow, as I may call it, apparently the reflection from the cloud beyond which the sun went down on the thick atmosphere of the horizon, is unusually bright and lasting. Long, broken clouds in the horizon, in the dun atmosphere,—as if the fires of day were still smoking there,—and with red and golden edging like the saddle-clothes of steeds of the sun...and I detect, just above the horizon, the narrowest imaginable white sickle of the new moon. December 23, 1851

Sunset from Fair Haven Hill. This evening there are many clouds in the west into which the sun goes down so that we have our visible or apparent sunset and red evening sky as much as fifteen minutes before the real sunset. You must be early on the hills to witness such a sunset,—by half past four at least. Then all the vales, even to the horizon, are full of a purple vapor, which half veils the distant mountains, and the windows of undiscoverable farmhouses shine like an early candle or a fire. After the sun has gone behind a cloud, there appears to be a gathering of clouds around his setting, and for a few moments his light in the amber sky seems more intense, brighter, and purer than at noonday. I think you never see such a brightness in the noonday heavens as in the western sky sometimes, just before the sun goes down in clouds, like the ecstasy which we [are] told sometimes lights up the face of a dying man. That is a serene or evening death, like the end of the day. Then, at last, through all the grossness which has accumulated in the atmosphere of day, is seen a patch of serene sky fairer by contrast with the surrounding dark than midday, and even the gross atmosphere of the day is gilded and made pure as amber by the setting sun, as if the day's sins were forgiven it. The man is blessed who every day is permitted to behold anything so pure and serene as the western sky at sunset, while revolutions vex the world. December 27, 1851

Consider in what respects the winter sunsets differ from the summer ones. Shall I ever in summer evenings see so celestial a reach of blue sky contrasting with amber as I have seen a few days since. The day sky in winter corresponds for clarity to the night sky, in which the stars shine and twinkle so brightly in this latitude. December 31, 1851

And then such fantastic feathery scrawls of gauze-like vapor on this elysian ground! We never tire of the drama of sunset. I go forth each afternoon and look into the west a quarter of an hour before sunset, with fresh curiosity, to see what new picture will be painted there, what new panorama exhibited, what new dissolving views...Every day a new picture is painted and framed, held up for half an hour, in such lights as the Great Artist chooses, and then withdrawn, and the curtain falls. And then the sun goes down, and long the afterglow gives light. And then the damask curtains glow along the western window. And now the first star is lit, and I go home. January 7, 1852

It is a fair sunset, with many purplish fishes in the horizon, pinkish and golden with bright edges; like a school of purplish whales, they sail or float down from the north; or like leopards' skins they hang in the west. If the sun goes behind a cloud, it is still reflected from the least haziness or vapor in that part of the sky, the air is so clear; and the afterglow is remarkably long. And now the blaze is put out, and only a few glowing clouds, like the flickering light of the fire, skirt the west. And now only the brands and embers, mixed with smoke, make an Indian red along the horizon. And the new moon and the

evening star, close together, preside over the twilight scene. January 23, 1852

That point where the sun goes down is the cynosure which attracts all eyes at sundown and half an hour before. What do all other parts of the horizon concern us? Our eyes follow the path of that great luminary. We watch for his rising, and we observe his setting. He is a companion and fellow-traveler we all have. We pity him who has his cheerless dwelling elsewhere, even in the northwest or southwest, off the high road of nature. January 29, 1852

Twenty minutes after seven, I sit at my window to observe the sun set. The lower clouds in the north and southwest grow gradually darker as the sun goes down, since we now see the side opposite to the sun, but those high overhead, whose under sides we see reflecting the day, are light. The small clouds low in the western sky were at first dark also, but, as the sun descends, they are lit up and aglow all but their cores. Those in the east, though we see their sunward sides, are a dark blue, presaging night, only the highest faintly glowing. A roseate redness, clear as amber, suffuses the low western sky about the sun, in which the small clouds are mostly melted, only their golden edges still revealed. The atmosphere there is like some kinds of wine, perchance, or molten cinnabar, if that is red, in which also all kinds of pearls and precious stones are melted. Clouds generally near the horizon, except near the sun, are now a dark blue. (The sun sets.) It is half past seven. The roseate glow deepens to purple. The low western sky is now, and has been for some minutes, a splendid map, where the fancy can trace islands, continents, and cities beyond compare. The glow forsakes the high eastern clouds, the uppermost clouds in the west now darken, the glow having forsaken them too; they become a dark blue, and anon their under sides reflect a deep red, like heavy damask curtains, after they had already been dark. The general redness gradually fades into a pale reddish tinge in the horizon, with a clear white light above it, in which the clouds grow more conspicuous and darker and darker blue, appearing to follow in the wake of the sun, and it is now a quarter to eight, or fifteen minutes after sunset, twenty-five minutes from the first. A quarter of an hour later, or half an hour after sunset, the white light grows cream-colored above the increasing horizon redness, passing through white into blue above. The western clouds, high and low, are now dark fuscous, not dark blue, but the eastern clouds are not so dark as the western. Now, about twenty-minutes after the first glow left the clouds above the sun's place, there is a second faint fuscous or warm brown glow in the edges of the dark clouds there, sudden and distinct, and it fades again, and it is early starlight, but the tops of the eastern clouds still are white, reflecting the day. The cream-color grows more yellowish or amber. About three quarters of an hour after sunset the evening red is deepest, i.e., a general atmospheric redness close to the west horizon. There is more of it, after all, than I expected, for the day has been clear and rather cool, and the evening red is what was the blue haze by day...As the light in the west fades, the sky there, seen between the clouds, has a singular clarity and serenity. July 23, 1852.

At the window.—The clear sky in the west, the sunset window, has a cloud both above and below. The edges of these clouds about the sun glow golden, running into fuscous. A dark shower is vanishing in the southeast. There will commonly be a window in the west. The sun enters the low cloud, but still is reflected brightly, though more brassily perhaps, from the edges of the upper cloud. There is as yet no redness in the heavens. Now the glow becomes redder, tinging new edges of the clouds near and higher up the sky, as they were dipped in an invisible reddening stream of light, into a rosy bath. Far in the southwest, along the horizon, is now the fairer rose-tinted or flesh-colored sky, the west being occupied by a dark cloud mainly, and, still further south, a huge boulder shines like a chalk cliff tinged with pink. The rear of the departing shower is blushing. August 1, 1852

If I were to choose a time for a friend to make a passing visit to this world for the first time, in the full possession of all his faculties, perchance it would be at a moment when the sun was setting with

splendor in the east, his light reflected far and wide through the clarified air after a rain, and a brilliant rainbow, as now, overarched the eastern sky...Would he not be tempted to take up his abode here?
August 7, 1852

We see the rainbow apparently when we are on the edge of the rain, just as the sun is setting. If we are too deep in the rain, then it will appear dim. Sometimes it is so near that I see a portion of its arch this side of the woods in the horizon, tinged them. Sometimes we are completely within it, enveloped by it, and experience the realization of the child's wish. The obvious colors are red and green. Why green? It is astonishing how brilliant the red may be. What is the difference between the red and the ordinary red of the evening sky? Who does not feel that here is a phenomenon which natural philosophy alone is inadequate to explain? August 7, 1852, continued

Coming by Hayden's, I see that, the sun setting, its rays, which yet find some vapor to lodge on in the clear cold air, impart a purple tinge to the mountains in the northwest. Methinks it is only in cold weather I see this. October 26, 1852

For three quarters of an hour the sun is a great round red ball in the west, reflected in the water; at first a scarlet, but as it descends growing more purple and crimson and larger, with a blue bar of a cloud across it; still reflected in the water, two suns, one above the other, below the hilly bank; as if it were a round hole in the cope of heaven, through which we looked into a crimson atmosphere. If such scenes were painted faithfully they would be pronounced unnatural. It is remarkable at how little distance a hillside covered with lupines looks blue, while a house or board painted blue is seen so great a distance.
May 27, 1853

A beautiful sunset about 7.30; just clouds enough in the west (we are on Fair Haven Hill); they arrange themselves about the western gate. And now the sun sinks out of sight just on the north side of Watatic, and the mountains, north and south, are at once a dark indigo blue, for they had been darkening for an hour or more. Two small clouds are left on the horizon between Watatic and Monadnock, their sierra edges all on fire. Three minutes after the sun is gone, there is a bright and memorable afterglow in his path, and a brighter and more glorious light falls on the clouds above the portal. His car, borne further round, brings us in the angle of exultation. Those little sierra clouds look like two castles on fire, and I see the fire through ruined windows. The low west horizon glows now, five or six minutes after sunset, with a delicate salmon-color tinged with rose, deepest where the sun disappeared, and fading off upward; and north and south are dark-blue cloud islands in it. When I invert my head these delicate salmon-colored clouds look like a celestial Sahara sloping gently upward, an inclined plane upward, to be traveled by caravans bound heavenward, with blue oases in it. June 26, 1853

Meanwhile the night is rapidly gathering her forces in deepening lines of shade under the east side of the willow causeway and the woods. Now the sun has dipped into the western ocean. He is one half below the horizon, and I see lines of distinct forest trees, miles and miles away on some ridge, now revealed against his disk. It takes many a western woodland—go far enough, a whole Iowa—to span it. Now only the smallest segment of its sphere, like a coal of fire rising above the forest, is seen sending a rosy glow up the horizon sky. July 24, 1853

It has been cloudy and milder this afternoon, but now I begin to see, under the clouds in the west horizon, a clear crescent of yellowish sky, and suddenly a glorious yellow sunlight falls on all the eastern landscape—russet fields and hillsides, evergreens and rustling oaks and single leafless trees. In addition to the clearness of the air at this season, the light is all from one side, and, none being absorbed or dissipated in the heavens, but it being reflected both from the russet earth and the clouds, it

is intensely bright, and all the limbs of a maple seen far eastward rising over a hill are wonderfully distinct and lit. I think that we have some sunsets as this, and peculiar to the season, every year. I should call it the russet afterglow of the year. It may not be warm, but must be clear and comparatively calm. November 28, 1853

It is a true winter sunset, almost cloudless, clear, cold indigo-y along the horizon. The evening star is seen shining brightly, before the twilight has begun. A rosy tint suffuses the eastern horizon. The outline of the mountains is wonderfully distinct and hard, and they are a dark blue and very near. Wachusett looks like a right whale over our bow, plowing the continent, with his flukes well down. He has a vicious look, as if he had a harpoon in him. December 27, 1853

The tints of the sunset sky are never purer and more ethereal than in the coldest winter days. This evening, though the colors are not brilliant, the sky is crystalline and the pale fawn-tinged clouds are very beautiful. I wish to get on to a hill to look down on the winter landscape. We go about these days as if we had fetters on our feet. We walk in the stocks, stepping into the holes made by hour predecessors. January 2, 1854

an elm in the yellow twilight looks very rich, as if moss- or ivy-clad, and a dark blue cloud extends into the dun-golden sky, on which there is a little fantastic cloud like a chicken walking up to the point of it, with its neck outstretched. The reflected sky is more dun and richer than the real one. Take a glorious sunset sky and double it, so that it shall extend downward beneath the horizon as much as above it, blotting out the earth, and let the lowest half be of the deepest tint, and every beauty more than before insisted on, and you seem withal to be floating directly into it. September 7, 1854

There was a splendid sunset while I was on the water, beginning at the Clamshell reach. All the lower edge of a very broad dark-slate cloud which reached up backward almost to the zenith was lit up through and through with a dun golden fire, the sun being below the horizon, like a furze plain densely on fire, a short distance above the horizon, for there was a clear, pale robin's egg sky beneath, and some little clouds on which the light fell high in the sky but nearer, seen against the upper part of distant uniform dark-slate one, were of a fine grayish silver color, with fine mother-o' pearl tints unusual at sunset. The furze gradually burnt out on the lower edge of the cloud, changed into a smooth, hard pale pink vermilion, which gradually faded into a gray satiny pearl, a fine Quaker-color. September 25, 1854

We have now those early, still clear winter sunsets over the snow. It is but mid-afternoon when I see the sun setting far through the woods, and there is that peculiar clear vitreous greenish sky in the west, as it were a molten gem. The day is short; it seems to be composed of two twilights merely; the morning and the evening twilight make the whole day. December 11, 1854

The sun is set, and over the valley, which looks like an outlet of Walden toward Fair Haven, I see a burnished bar of cloud stretched low and level, as if it were the bar over that passageway to Elysium, the last column in the train of the sun. When I get as far as my bean-field, the reflected white in the winter horizon of this perfectly cloudless sky is being condensed at the horizon's edge, and its hue deepening into a dun golden, against which the tops of the trees—pines and elms—are seen with beautiful distinctness, and a slight blush begins to suffuse the eastern horizon, and so the picture of the day is done and set in a gilded frame. Such is a winter eve. December 9, 1856

It was as if the air, purified by the long storm, reflected these few rays from side to side with a complete illumination, like a perfectly polished mirror, while the effect was greatly enhanced by the

contrast with the dull dark clouds and sombre earth. As if Nature did not dare at once to let in the full blaze of the sun to this combustible atmosphere. It was a serene, elysian light, in which the deeds I have dreamed of but not realized might have been performed. At the eleventh hour, late in the year, we have visions of the life we might have lived. No perfectly fair weather ever offered such an arena for noble acts. It was such a light as we behold but dwell not in! In each case, every recess was filled and lit up with this pure white light. The maples were Potter's, far down stream, but I dreamed I walked like a liberated spirit in their maze. The withered meadow-grass was as soft and glorious as paradise. And then it was remarkable that the light-giver should have revealed to me, for all life, the heaving white breasts of those two ducks within this glade of light. It was extinguished and relit as it traveled.
October 28, 1857

When I get down near to Cardinal Shore, the sun near setting, its light is wonderfully reflected from a narrow edging of yellowish stubble at the edge of the meadow ice and foot of the hill, an edging only two or three feet wide, and the stubble but a few inches high. (I am looking east.) It is remarkable because the ice is but a dull lead-color (it is so soft and sodden), reflecting no light, and the hill beyond is a dark russet, here and there patched with snow, but this narrow intermediate line of stubble is all aglow. I get its true color and brightness best when I do not look directly at it, but a little above it toward the hill, seeing it with the lower part of my eye more truly and abstractly. It is as if all the rays slid over the ice and lodged against and were reflected by the stubble. It is surprising how much sunny light a little straw that survives the winter will reflect. January 4, 1858

Standing on Hunt's Bridge at 5 o'clock, the sun just ready to set, I notice that its light on my note-book is quite rosy or purple, though the sun itself and its halo are merely yellow, and there is no purple in the western sky. Perhaps I might have detected a purple tinge already in the eastern sky, had I looked, and I was exactly at that distance this side the sunset where the foremost of the rosy waves of light roll in the wake of the sun, and the white page was the most suitable surface to reflect it.. October 19, 1858

We had a true November sunset after a dark, cloudy afternoon. The sun reached a clear stratum just before setting, beneath the dark cloud, though ready to enter another on the horizon's edge, and a cold, yellow sunlight suddenly illumined the withered grass of the fields around, near and far, eastward. Such a phenomenon as, when it occurs later, I call the afterglow of the year. November 9, 1858

We are interested at this season by the manifold ways in which the light is reflected to us. Ascending a little knoll covered with sweet-fern, shortly after, the sun appearing but a point above the sweet-fern, its light was reflected from a dense mass of the bare downy twigs of this plant in a surprising manner which would not be believed if described. It was quite like the sunlight reflected from grass and weeds covered with hoar frost. Yet in an ordinary light these are but dark or dusky looking twigs with scarcely a noticeable downiness. Yet as I saw it, there was a perfect halo of light resting on the knoll as I moved to right or left. A myriad of surfaces are now prepared to reflect the light. This is one of the hundred silvery lights of November. The setting sun, too, is reflected from windows more brightly than at any other season. "November Lights" would be a theme for me. November 17, 1858

About half an hour before sunset this intensely clear cold evening (thermometer at five – 6°), I observe all the sheets of ice (and they abound everywhere now in the fields), when I look from one side about at right angles with the sun's rays, reflect a green light. This is the case even when they are in the shade. I walk back and forth in the road waiting to see the pink. The windows on the skirts of the village reflect the setting sun with intense brilliancy, a dazzling glitter, it is so cold. Standing thus on one side of the hill, I begin to see a pink light reflected from the snow there about fifteen minutes before the sun sets. This gradually deepens to purple and violet in some places, and the pink is very distinct, especially

when, after looking at the simply white snow on other sides, you turn your eyes to the hill. Even after all direct sunlight is withdrawn from the hilltop, as well as from the valley in which you stand, you see, if you are prepared to discern it, a faint and delicate tinge of purple or violet there. This was in a very clear and cold evening when the thermometer was -6° . This is one of the phenomena of the winter sunset, this distinct pink light reflected from the brows of snow-clad hills on one side of you as you are facing the sun. January 10, 1859

I ascended Ball's Hill to see the sun set. How red its light at this hour! I covered its orb with my hand, and let its rays light up the fine woolen fibers of my glove. They were a dazzling rose-color. It takes the gross atmosphere of earth to make this redness. December 23, 1859

Now I see, as I am on the ice by Hubbard's meadow, some wisps of vapor in the west and southwest advancing. They are of a fine, white, thready grain, curved like skates at the end. Have we not more finely divided clouds in winter than in summer? flame-shaped, asbestos-like? I doubt if the clouds show as fine a grain in warm weather. They are wrung dry now. They are not expanded but contracted, like spiculae. What hieroglyphics in the winter sky! January 24, 1860

Those wisps in the west advanced and increased like white flames with curving tongues,—like an aurora by day. Now I see a few hard and distinct ripple-marks at right angles with them, or parallel with the horizon, the lines indicating the ridges of the ripple-marks. These are like the abdominal plates of a snake. This occupies only a very small space in the sky. Looking right up overhead, I see some gauzy cloud-stuff there, so thin as to be grayish,—brain-like, finely reticulated; so thin yet so firmly drawn, membranous. These, methinks, are always seen overhead only. Now, underneath the flamy asbestos part, I detect an almost imperceptible rippling in a thin lower vapor,—an incipient mackerelling (in form). Now, nearly to the zenith, I see, not a mackerel sky, but blue and thin, blue-white, finely mixed, like fleece finely picked and even strewn over a blue ground. The white is in small roundish flocks. In a mackerel sky there is a parallelism of oblongish scales. This is so remote as to appear stationary, while a lower vapor is rapidly moving eastward. Such clouds as the above are the very thin advance-guard of the cloud behind. It soon comes on more densely from the northwest, and darkens all. January 24, 1860 continued

We have such a habit of looking away that we see not what is around us. How few are aware that in winter, when the earth is covered with snow and ice, the phenomenon of the sunset sky is double! The one is on the earth around us, the other in the horizon. These snow-clad hills answer to the rosy isles in the west. The winter is coming when I shall walk the sky. The ice is a solid sky on which we walk. It is the inverted year. There is an annual light in the darkness of the winter night. The shadows are blue, as the sky is forever blue. In winter we are purified and translated. The earth does not absorb our thoughts. It becomes a Valhalla. February 12, 1860

At first the sky was completely overcast, but, just before setting, the sun came out into a clear space in the horizon and fell on the east end of the pond and the hillside, and this sudden blaze of light on the still very fresh green leaves was a wonderful contrast with the previous and still surrounding darkness. Indeed, the bright sunlight was at this angle reflected from the water at the east end—while I in the middle was in the shade of the east woods—up under the verdure of the bushes and trees on the shore and on Pine Hill, especially to the tender under sides and to the lower leaves not often lit up. Thus a double amount of light fell on them, and the most vivid and varied shades of green were revealed. I never saw such a green *glow* before. The outline of each shrub and tree was a more or less distinct downy or silvery crescent, where the light was reflected from the under side of the most downy, or newest, leaves,—as I should not have seen it at midday,—either because the light fell more on the

under sides of the leaves, being so horizontal and also reflected upward, or because the leaves stood more erect at this hour and after a cloudy day, or for both reasons. The lit water at the east end was invisible to me, or no more than a line, but the shore itself was a very distinct whitish line. When the sun fell lower, and the sunlight no longer fell on the pond, the green blaze of the hillside was at once very much diminished, because the light was no longer reflected upward to it. August 28, 1860

For two or more nights past we have had remarkable glittering golden sunsets as I came home from the post-office, it being cold and cloudy just above the horizon. There was the most intensely bright golden light in the west end of the street, extending under the elms, and the very dust a quarter of a mile off was like gold-dust. I wondered how a child could stand quietly in that light, as if it had been a furnace. October 9, 1860