

**A Sea of Candles, A Sky of Tolling Bells**  
**A Prayer Poem, In Memoriam: The Fallen of the Harvard-Radcliffe Class of 1983**  
**By Antonetta A. DiGiustini '83**

Nunc lento sonitu dicunt, morieris

*Now, This Bell Tolling Softly for Another, Says to Me: Thou Must Die*

“[A]ll mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God’s hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness....Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee....No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction.”<sup>1</sup>  
— John Donne (1572-1631), “XVII. Meditation upon our Humane Condition,” *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624)

“O eternal and most gracious God, who hast been pleased to speak to us, not only in the voice of nature, who speaks in our hearts, and of thy word, which speaks to our ears, but in the speech of speechless creatures,...in the speech of unbelieving men,...I humbly accept thy voice in the sound of this sad and funeral bell. At first, I bless thy glorious name, that in this sound and voice I can hear thy instructions, in another man’s to consider mine own condition; and to know, that this bell which tolls for another, before it come to ring out, may take me in too....And being thus, O my God,...and conformed to thy will by thy Spirit,...I am bold, O Lord, to bend my prayers to thee for his assistance, the voice of whose bell hath called me to this devotion.”<sup>2</sup>  
— John Donne (1572-1631), “XVII. Prayer, upon several occasions, to him,” *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624)

A sea of candles, a sky of tolling bells:  
O Lord, we gather together as a class in this sacred space of Memorial Church,  
Where we gathered as a class for our Baccalaureate exercises and on our Commencement morning;  
This Memorial Church, in its seventy-fifth-anniversary year,  
Built and dedicated to the memory of Harvard men,  
Fallen in service to their country, in the “War to End All Wars,” in the First World War,  
This sacred space which has become a sanctuary, Harvard’s locus of public remembrance  
For all the major armed conflicts of the twentieth century.  
In this sacred meeting space woven into our undergraduate lives,  
We thus come together to remember our fallen classmates,  
To honor and celebrate their uniqueness as human beings,  
And we reflect upon our own mortality,  
That in so doing, we may be inspired to appreciate continuously and deeply the precious gift that is life  
And dedicate each day of our lives to making a difference in our world.

A sea of candles, a sky of tolling bells:  
“In memory of voices that are hushed,”  
This, the thought-provoking inscription, which the bell of Memorial Church bears,  
This same bell which beckoned us to our classes as we moved to and fro Harvard Yard,  
This same bell which rang gloriously on Commencement,  
This same bell we now toll in loving remembrance of our fallen classmates,  
This bell now tolls the losses we carry and bear as a class.  
A sea of candles, a sky of tolling bells:  
The bells we toll, a marker of fierce insight, penetrating to the fundamental reality of things,  
The candles we light, these remembrances of light and hope shining, prevailing in the midst of darkness.

A sea of candles, a sky of tolling bells:  
We light a sea of candles in loving remembrance of our classmates,  
Fallen through battles with cancer, through battles with AIDS,  
Through tragedies of fatal car and mountaineering accidents,  
As an innocent adult victim in youth gang violence—  
Their deaths a microcosm of the scourges of our generation and of our times.  
Because we are involved in humankind, any person's, any classmate's death diminishes us,  
Every classmate is a piece of the class, for we are not each entire of ourselves.

A sea of candles, a sky of tolling bells:  
We rest by these lit candles lilies in their memory,  
Lilies, like lotuses, symbols of rebirth, springing forth creation,  
Lotuses growing forth out of the muck and mire,  
Growing up mysteriously out of what looks dead.  
No man is an island for we are part of this body of the Class of 1983 forever,  
This body, which was brought into being in 1979;  
We suffer together when there is a loss among us,  
But there is also a rejoicing that we are forever part of this body,  
And that part which is lost is seeding something else.  
Let us be like the lilies and lotuses, springing forth our creative good deeds out into the world,  
Planting new seedlings.

A sea of candles, a sky of tolling bells:  
"O sweet fruit brought forth by the tree of suffering!"<sup>3</sup>  
Let us through the seedlings of our loss, bring forth transformation,  
Bring forth a continual rededication to hope, renewal, life, thanksgiving,  
That in so doing, we may indeed dedicate each day of our lives to making a difference in our world,  
And truly, then, our fallen classmates and we will indeed "leave a white  
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,  
A width, a shining peace,"<sup>4</sup> under the sun and moon, under the sky, above the sea,  
Carrying with our loss, the gathered radiance of a sea of candles, a sky of tolling bells.

In Thanksgiving and Remembrance  
Harvard-Radcliffe Class of 1983 Twenty-Fifth Reunion Memorial Service  
The Memorial Church  
Harvard University  
7 June 2008

## Notes, “A Sea of Candles, A Sky of Tolling Bells”

<sup>1</sup> John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Death's Duel*, with *The Life of Dr. John Donne* by Izaak Walton, edited by John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc., 1999), pp. 102-103. Vintage Spiritual Classics editors' note on this edition: “The texts of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, *Death's Duel*, and *The Life of Dr. John Donne* have been edited—as much as is useful without altering or damaging any original meaning—to conform with contemporary American spelling and punctuation.” This edition contains Donne's last sermon, *Death's Duel*; the colorful short biography of him written by his contemporary Izaak Walton; and a superb and illuminating preface by Andrew Motion, Poet Laureate of England. Donne battled illness in 1623 and 1624, during which time he organized, wrote, and published his *Devotions*. He organized the intricate structure of his *Devotions* at an intense pace, and completed it during his recovery. Andrew Motion illustrates that Donne described the process in a letter to his friend, Sir Robert Ker: “Though I have left my bed, I have not left my bedside; I sit there still....I have used this leisure, to put the meditations [I] had in my sickness, into some such order, as may minister some holy delight.” The structure of *Devotions* is comprised of twenty-three sections that follow “The Stations of the Sickness”; each section is divided into three parts: “Meditations upon our Humane Condition,” “Expostulations, and Debatelements with God,” and “Prayers, upon several occasions, to him.” As Andrew Motion elucidates: “John Donne's genius thrived on contradiction; *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* is one of his most paradoxical works. It concentrates on death while celebrating life; it is somber but not sad....”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>3</sup> “Message” in *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1993), p. 5. Thich Nhat Hanh (b.1926), Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Zen master, teacher, scholar, poet, and peace activist, wrote “Message” in 1964 in Saigon. The poem was printed in 1966 by the Fellowship of Reconciliation as a Christmas card. Thich Nhat Hanh was instrumental in founding in the 1960s the “engaged Buddhism” movement. He played a central role in the Buddhist nonviolent movement for peace in his native Vietnam and served as Chair of the Buddhist Peace Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks in 1969. He persuaded Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1966 to oppose the Vietnam War publicly. In nominating Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: “Thich Nhat Hanh is a holy man, for he is humble and devout. He is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity. His ideas for peace... would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity....Conferring the Prize on Thich Nhat Hanh would... remind all nations that men of good will stand ready to lead warring elements out of an abyss of hatred and self-destruction.” For over thirty years, Thich Nhat Hanh has been exiled from his homeland because of his nonviolent efforts to reconcile North and South Vietnam. He lives in exile in the south of France, at Plum Village Monastery, where he teaches, writes, and works to help war veterans and refugees worldwide; he also leads retreats worldwide on “the art of mindful living.” In 2002, he delivered a talk at Harvard in the Memorial Church, on peace in the heart, peace in our post-9/11 world; for Thich Nhat Hanh, world peace and interpersonal peace are found in the same way: through compassion.

<sup>4</sup> Rupert Brooke, “1914 Sonnet IV. The Dead” in *The Lost Voices of World War I: An International Anthology of Writers, Poets and Playwrights*, edited by Tim Cross (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. 55. “Sonnet IV. The Dead” is one of five war sonnets that comprise Rupert Brooke's *1914*, a group of sonnets he wrote during the first months of the First World War. Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) began King's College, Cambridge in 1906, where he went as a scholar, and also immersed himself in acting and the activities of the University Fabian Society, of which he became president. His talent and his unswerving dedication to poetry produced poems in which a modern voice was making itself heard through the period diction. Brooke engaged fully in social and intellectual concerns of his time, with essays and articles, including “Democracy and the Arts” (1910). He began to publish verse in 1909, and a collection, *Poems*, appeared in 1911. By the outbreak of the First World War, Brooke was recognized as the most prominent member of the group of young poets who called themselves, the Georgians; his work was featured in the first two *Georgian Poetry* collections. He was also an important contributor to the poetry journal, *New Numbers*. It was for *New Numbers* that he wrote the group of war sonnets, which, together, were known as *1914*. He wrote them in December 1914 and finalized them in the first days of January 1915. *The Times Literary Supplement* of 11 March 1915 wrote of Brooke's war sonnets: “It is impossible to shred up this beauty for the purpose of criticism. These sonnets are personal—never were sonnets more personal since Sidney died—and yet the very blood and youth of England seem to find expression in them. They speak not for one heart only, but for all to whom her call has come in the hour of need and found instantly ready....No passion for glory is here, no bitterness, no gloom, only a happy, clear-sighted, all-surrendering love.” When news of Brooke's death in April 1915 on the Greek island of Skyros, on his way to battle on the island of Gallipoli, reached London, Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, wrote an obituary for Brooke in *The Times*, in which Churchill described Brooke's war sonnets as “incomparable” and written with “genius,” and described Brooke himself as “Joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed....ruled by high undoubting purpose...and all that one could wish England's noblest sons to be....” Brooke's war sonnets were reprinted in a collection of his poetry entitled, *1914 and Other Poems*, published in May 1915; the book was reprinted on average every eight weeks throughout the war.

