



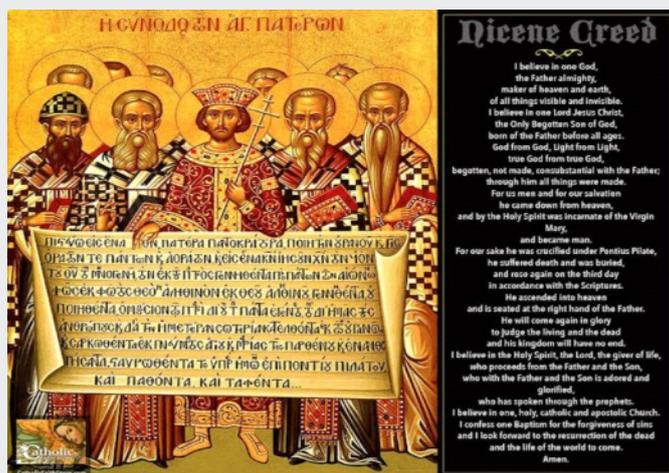
## Faith without creeds

In the town of Portsmouth in New Hampshire, there is a Unitarian Universalist Church known as South Church. I have had the privilege of joining their Sunday service several times over the years whilst staying with my family in The States. For me, the experience has been like a breath of fresh air. South Church is a multi-generational congregation whose members hold a wide variety of religious beliefs and follow a number of different spiritual paths. This diversity is highly valued. Some of their congregation have always been part of the wider Unitarian Universalist church which has its roots in liberal Protestant Christianity. Many, however, come from other religious traditions or no tradition at all. Furthermore, the church draws not only on the wisdom and guidance to be found in Judeo-Christian teachings, but also on other sources such as alternative religious and spiritual traditions, humanist philosophy, science and the natural world.

One of the most striking things about their ethos as a community is the absence of any creeds. Like the Quakers, Unitarian universalists do not have a doctrinal statement of belief to which they are required to give assent. Instead, they are asked to make a shared commitment to what they call their covenant. Essentially, this is a statement of shared values, principles and goals. It is an agreement about how we they seek to walk in the world as a people of faith. It embraces such core values as unconditional acceptance and respect, equity, democracy, love and compassion and such goals as the free and responsible search for truth and meaning and the creation of a world community in which there is liberty, peace and justice for all. Moreover, unlike most creeds, this is not an agreement that is set in concrete. It is seen as 'a living document', one that can be revisited and reworked as often as the need arises.

I have found not having to stand up and recite the creed in a Sunday morning service liberating. I have had no difficulty at all voicing my agreement with their covenant as their shared values and goals are so closely aligned with my own and, I suspect, with those of the majority of people who are treading a spiritual path. And I also love that their hymnal entitled 'Singing the living tradition' is so inclusive in its language and draws on such a wide range of cultural sources and religious inspirations such as African American spirituals, folk and popular songs and chants and rounds gathered from various spiritual traditions across the world. I have felt more at home there than I have in any other church.

My positive experience of this creed-less church caused me to wonder how and why mainline Christianity chose to trap itself within a credal system in a way that most other religions did not. And that in turn led me into an exploration of early church history. To understand the chain of events, we need to take ourselves back to the fourth century. It is the year 325 and the early church is mired in controversy. Arius, a Christian priest from Alexandria, is openly challenging a key element of traditional Christian doctrine by claiming that Jesus was not divine but a was a created being. And his



teachings are becoming so widely accepted that they have drawn the attention of Emperor Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Fearing that Arius's teachings might destabilise his entire empire, Constantine calls a Church Council meeting at Nicaea in order to suppress them. Tragically, the Council chooses to resolve the problem by formulating a definitive doctrinal statement of belief which it requires Arius to sign. He refuses and so becomes one of the earliest heretics.

This is how the so-called Nicene Creed was born. To this day, much of mainstream Christianity continues to see it as the touchstone of true Christian faith. It is recited or sung on a weekly basis in church services all over the world. For many who are called to enter into Christian ministry, whether within or outside of the church, it is the door-opener, a profession of faith that they cannot avoid. And at the same time, it closes the church door to many thousands of people, people like me for whom it has been a major stumbling block we could not with integrity ignore.

The Christian church's obsession with uniformity of belief is perhaps not surprising. When you tell people what they must believe in order to remain 'in the fold', it creates uniformity. It gives people a sense of identity and security. It generates cohesion and group solidarity by determining who is 'in' and who is 'out'. It silences those who would sow confusion or peddle teachings which the church deems to be 'false'. It keeps people loyal to 'the truth' and it helps to maintain the power and control of those who are in authority.

But the dangers of imposing creeds in this way far outweigh the advantages. Creeds may unify but they do not create unity. In reality, they do the opposite. They act as a divisive wedge. They give rise to a judgmental, self-righteous 'us and them' mentality that pits us against each other in our shared search for truth and meaning. Through setting in concrete one particular version of this truth, moreover, they run the risk of stifling learning, discovery, genuine debate and innovative thinking. In effect, they create a theological straightjacket that excludes rather than includes, that imprisons rather than liberates, that deadens rather than enlivens. They also give us the message, whether intentionally or not, that believing 'the right things' is the most important thing our faith requires of us. But as Marcus Borg points out, the origin of the word 'creed' comes from the root of a Latin verb that has very little to do with believing a particular set of ideas or statements. Indeed, it has much more to do with the giving of the heart than the aligning of the mind. Or as Borg puts it, it is more about 'beloving' than 'believing'.

I believe that when I visit South Church, I catch more than a glimpse of what the Christian faith looks like when it takes its cues from the life, teachings and humanity of Jesus, when it becomes less obsessed with what we believe and more concerned with how we live and love. The core of a living and life-giving Christian faith is not 'right belief'. It is Love. And Love *is*, as Jesus taught us, all that matters.

Kaitlyn Steele



*The flaming chalice is the symbol of Unitarian Universalism. The lighting of the chalice at the start of worship is seen both as inviting the gathered community into sacred space and as illuminating the world we are called to serve with love and justice. The flame represents the fire of our commitment to transforming the world but is also an expression of the manifestation of divine possibility within each human soul - what Ralph Waldo Emerson called 'divine spark'.*

## Progressive voices: Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver, a multi-award winning American poet, teacher and nature mystic, was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio in the 1930s. The product of a highly dysfunctional family, she described herself as having had very hard childhood 'in a very dark and broken house'. Neglected by her mother and sexually abused by her father, she found refuge from home life in the nearby woods where she developed a lifelong passion for solitary walks. In her teens, she also began writing poetry. When she walked, she would often carry with her a hand-sewn notebook for recording her observations and impressions and the words they inspired. 'I made a world out of words,' she admitted, 'And it was my salvation'. In her thirties, she moved to her adopted home in Provincetown, New England where she lived with Molly Cook, her lifelong partner for over forty years. She had fallen in love with the town, with its Mediterranean light and with its 'marvellous convergence of land and water' and it inspired much of her poetry.

While her faith did not fit neatly into the box of any organised religion and she remained deeply skeptical of it, Oliver described herself as a deeply spiritual person. She traced her belief in God back to her childhood and her poetry often reflects her thoughts and ideas about 'the god of dirt' as she calls God in one of her poems. Essentially, she was a panentheist. 'It is not hard,' she said, 'to understand where God's body is, it is everywhere and everything.' She wrote of 'the light at the centre of every cell' and urged us 'to be willing to be dazzled' by it.

Nature was her springboard to the sacred. She saw the Divine in its wild beauty and felt rooted and strengthened by her immersion in it. She also believed that it is through our communion with the natural world that we come to a clearer sense of who we are. She described herself as 'a praise poet'. Her work, she said, was 'loving this world' and helping people to 'remember what the Earth is meant to look like.' She saw her poetry as an expression of the depth of her gratitude for the gift of life and for the beauty of the world we inhabit.

Strongly influenced by the writings of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and the Sufi mystic, Rumi, she had a deeply held belief in the inherent goodness of people. She talked of the importance of holding together both the spiritual life and the life in this world and argued that, 'You have to be in the world to understand what the spiritual is all about.'



*And I am thinking: maybe just looking and listening  
is the real work.  
Maybe the world, without us  
is the real poem.  
Mary Oliver from 'The Book of Time'*

Oliver also wrote about prayer. For her, prayer is about noticing, about paying attention to what is around us:

*'Just pay attention, then patch together a few words... this isn't a contest but a doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak'.*

Oliver has been described as a visionary and as a 'poet of wisdom and generosity.' The simplicity, intelligibility and accessibility of her writing, whether poetry or prose, has helped her to become one of the best loved writers of modern times. It is passionate, deeply moving, exquisitely sensitive and utterly beautiful. It has a gentle meditative quality that speaks to the heart and stirs the soul.

She died of cancer in 2019. 'When it's over' she wrote in one of her poems, 'I want to say: All my life I was a bride married to amazement'. Through her writings, she has helped us to see the world afresh through the eyes of a mystic and to stay amazed. It is a fitting legacy.

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves. ...  
Mary Oliver from 'Wild Geese'*

## Progressive perspectives: Finding salvation

*'Like the word 'sin', 'salvation' is loaded and multilayered. And... its most common association hides rather than illuminates the rich meanings of the term in the Bible and the Christian tradition.'*

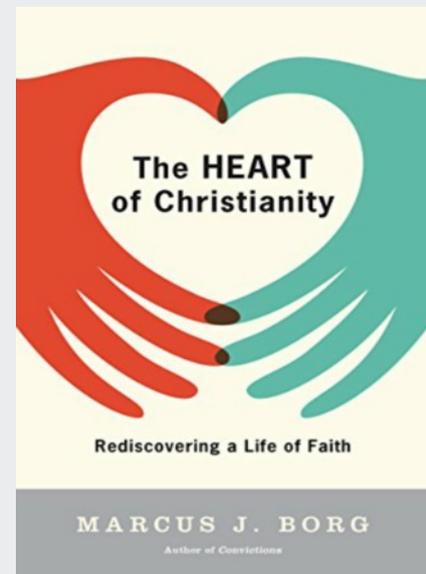
*Marcus Borg*

When Christians pose the question 'Have you been saved?', what they are usually asking is 'Are you confident that you'll go to heaven when you die?' And underlying that question is another: 'Do you believe the central claims that Christianity makes about God and Jesus?' For according to this version of Christianity, believing 'the right things' is what really matters. As Marcus Borg puts it in his book, 'The Heart of Christianity', 'it is *believing* that saves you.'

Borg argues, however, that this is a significant distortion and trivialisation of the biblical understanding of salvation which is in reality much richer, more complex and more life-affirming. Rather than focusing our attention on life after death, he says, salvation in the Bible is primarily 'a this-worldly phenomenon'. In other words, it is not about the promise of eternal life in the next world but about finding salvation in the life we are living in this world.

He notes that when the ancient Israelites spoke of salvation which they often did, they were not talking about going to heaven or about having eternal life as they had no concept of an afterlife. And even in the time of Jesus when the majority of Jews did believe in an afterlife, the primary emphasis of such New Testament writers as John and Paul remained the same. For example, when the Gospel of John speaks of 'eternal life', it often uses the present tense. Eternal life as John saw it is not something we attain after death, but something we can know and experience in the now. It is a present reality, not a hope for the future.

Furthermore, when Jesus talked of 'the kingdom of heaven' or 'the kingdom of God', it is clear that he did not see this kingdom as the place we go when we die. He spoke of the kingdom being 'at hand' and perhaps more importantly, 'within you' - in other words, the coming of the kingdom is something that happens *within* us and *in this life*.



The key to understanding the meaning of salvation lies in the origins of the word. It comes from the Latin word 'salvus' which means 'sound' or 'whole'. In essence, then, to be saved is to become whole. It is about embarking on a journey of inner transformation.

What does it mean though to speak of salvation as the search for wholeness? The word 'whole' is derived from the Old English word 'hal' which has two key layers of meaning - 'whole' or 'complete' and 'sound', 'healthy' or 'well'. It also has a strong link with the word 'holy' which comes from the same root word. The concepts of health, wholeness and holiness are, therefore, closely interlinked. They are qualities of being that are inter-dependent. To be whole is to experience well-being, is to be holy.

We have been telling each other salvation stories for thousands of years. They are in our myths and legends. They are in our sacred texts. They are in our modern day literature, plays and films. And these stories carry many different metaphors of the way of transformation. They tell us tales of home-coming from exile, of liberation from imprisonment, of awakening from sleep, of enlightenment in the dark, of rescue from lostness, of healing from woundedness, of death and rebirth.

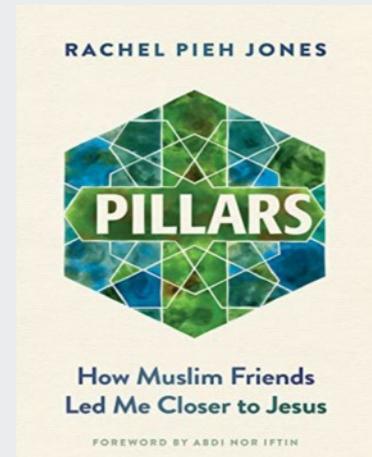
Salvation is all of these and more. It is a sacred quest that in the end, brings us back to the self we have always been. It is the journey of a lifetime and it is the most important journey we will ever make.

# Book review

Pillars: How Muslim friends led me closer to Jesus.

By Rachel Pieh Jones (2021) Plough Publishing

A review by Linda Byrne



This book is the story of an American evangelical Christian who moves from Minnesota to rural Somalia with her husband and twin toddlers, secure in a faith that defined who was right and wrong, who was saved and who needed saving. The author describes the difficulties of learning to live in such a different place and culture and how hard-won friendships and personal encounters help her to recognise her own fears and prejudices for what they are, whilst deepening her appreciation for Islam, a religion she had been taught to believe was full of evil, lies and darkness.

The stories are woven around the five pillars of Islam: creed, prayer, fasting, giving, and pilgrimage. The book is easy to read, very open and honest, and the audiobook is beautifully read. A quote from the introduction, referring to the family's flight from Somalia after the murders of an Italian woman and a British couple, gives a flavour of the writing style:

*The Islamic creed, the first pillar – known as the shahadah – begins, “There is no god but God.” As a Christian, I believed that much too. Before leaving the United States, ten months earlier, I had flippantly remarked that the safest place for a Christian was in the center of God’s will, how it was better to move across the planet to a potentially hostile location than to spend three days in the belly of a whale. I hid behind clichés and stories and left no room to grapple with visceral fear. Later I would understand God’s will as an inherently unsafe place to be. It hadn’t been safe for Jesus; it led him straight to torture and death. God never promised safety, no matter how I craved it. What did safe mean? People in the United States get shot in schools, in movie theaters, in office buildings. Drunk drivers hurtle down country roads. Lightning flashes, levees break, dogs bite. Pandemics rage, cancer strikes. Safety is a western illusion.*

This idea of safety being an illusion is probably more real than ever in Europe right now. One of the endorsements on the back of the book reads: ‘This is a beautiful story, beautifully told. It’s much more than the memoirs of a Christian American living in Africa and exploring Islam with devoted Muslims; it’s about learning how to be a good neighbour to the people around you, wherever you might be in the world. This is the kind of book we need right now.’

After moving to and settling in Djibouti, the author, finding herself to be pregnant, decides to stay in Djibouti and give birth there. She soon learns a Somali phrase: *Qabrigayga afka ayaa furan yahay* – the mouth of my grave is open. It is a prayer for protection and health and is commonly used by pregnant women living, as they do, in a country that has one of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world. After describing the mental struggles she faced throughout her pregnancy and the birth of her child, the author shows how she came to understand why people who experience a lack of control over their own lives and situations pray and react in the ways that they do.

*That’s why they sacrifice goats and create rituals. We all attempt to wrangle whatever sense of control we can over our lives. Some trust in nails, some trust in the blood of goats, some trust in their own competencies. I choose to trust in an unseen God.*

The book is full of insights into Islam, into Christianity, into the nature of faith, whatever shape it takes. If you want to see Islam from a different perspective, this book is highly recommended.

## Exploring spiritual practice:

### The art of soul journaling



If you enjoy writing, keeping a soul journal can be a very helpful way of connecting with, nurturing and 'growing' your soul. In his book, 'Care of the Soul', Thomas Moore, argues that keeping a spiritual journal is primarily 'a form of contemplation'. If we think of spiritual practice as any form of regular activity that enables us to connect with our spiritual self and with the Divine, then keeping a soul journal is undoubtedly a form of spiritual practice. Stephanie Dowrick, author of 'Creative Journal Writing' sees it as 'an unparalleled tool for spiritual awakening and development'.

The first step in developing a soul journaling practice is to purchase a special notebook to use exclusively as your soul journal. Choose it mindfully and with care. See it as a gift to yourself and as a way of acknowledging the value and importance of what you are doing. You may also want to consider buying yourself a special pen (or pens) to write with. It is of course possible to journal on your computer if you find that writing using a word processor works better for you. However, before you decide to do so, it may be worth experimenting with hand-writing it. Dowrick points out that hand-writing is a much more intimate and sensual experience and can make your journal writing feel more personal. If you do choose to word process it, you may want to think about buying yourself (and possibly decorating) a special folder to keep your entries in.

The second step is to find a special place and set aside a time in which to write your journal. As a minimum, you will need peace and quiet, privacy and freedom from interruptions. David Elkins, the author of 'Beyond Religion', talks about 'creating a sacred space' in which to do your reflection and writing. Ideally, this might be a room or a particular part of your home that you set aside, if only temporarily, for this purpose. He suggests choosing, arranging and possibly decorating this sacred space intuitively, letting your soul be your guide and 'making the area rich with things of your soul' such as objects, images, photographs, paintings, pieces of writing, quotes, music, flowers or incense – anything that helps you to tune into this innermost part of yourself. Creating a sacred space in this way can in itself generate an atmosphere that is hospitable and nourishing to the soul and that can encourage us to turn inwards and listen to that which is emerging within us. Each time you write, you may also find it helpful to engage in some form of simple ritual that helps you to enter into the sacred space you have created and to honour the work you are about to do. You could, for example, declutter your space beforehand; light a candle or oil burner; play some sacred music; lay out your journal, pens and other material mindfully; or sit in silent contemplation for a short time.

The third step is simply to start writing! Write as much and as often as you want to. Some people choose to set themselves the goal of writing a page or two in their journal every day as part of their spiritual practice. Others prefer to write when they feel led to. As a minimum, however, it may be helpful to make a commitment to yourself to write in your journal at least two or three times a week and for at least twenty minutes each time. Write about any aspect of your spirituality, your spiritual life or your spiritual journeying. Allow yourself to write about whatever is uppermost for you at the moment when you set out to write. There are no rules, no set topics to cover, no programmes to follow, no criteria to meet. Inevitably, you will at times find yourself writing about other aspects of your life as your spirituality cannot be separated out from the rest of your life and experience. Occasionally, you might find it helpful to engage in particular writing or self-reflective exercises as part of the process. For example, you might feel drawn to writing your own spiritual autobiography or to entering into an ongoing dialogue with your soul. The possibilities are endless!

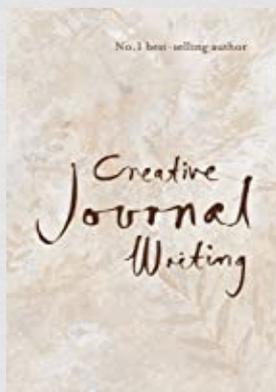
When you write, it is important to remember that you are writing for yourself, not for anyone else. There are no 'shoulds or 'oughts'. Your journal does not have to be beautifully crafted or elegantly written. You are not writing for publication. Don't worry about writing in sentences, spelling, grammar, neat hand-writing or even whether it's legible! Just write whatever comes in whatever way you want to. Recognise that journal writing is all about the process, not the product. Go with the flow of the thoughts, feelings and images that come to you as you sit down to write. Try to silence your internal critic. Don't censor, revise or edit your writing. Don't analyse or critique it. Try to let whatever surfaces flow freely onto the paper, however irrational, nonsensical or outrageous it might seem at times. Be as spontaneous and uninhibited as you can, And then let it be.

Some people find it helpful to write their journal in the form of a letter addressed to their soul or perhaps a companion to their soul. The journalist Anne Frank, for example, addressed her journal entries 'Dear Kitty'. You may find yourself wanting to use different colours of pen or crayon to express different things. Be as creative and as colourful as you want to be. You may also want to include images, symbols, drawings, photographs, poems, quotes from other writers – anything that helps you to express your spiritual self.

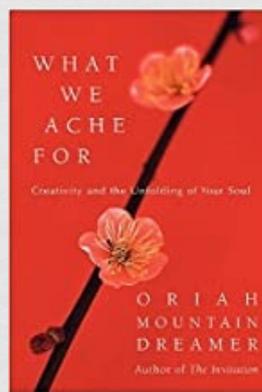
You may experience times when you feel bored or stuck, when you don't know what to write about next or when you can feel yourself resisting writing. Try to remain faithful to your soul journal through those times and to trust the journaling process even through dull or dark periods. In so doing, you are honouring your commitment to your spiritual self. And finally, take time to celebrate the uniqueness and originality of your journal and whatever it is bringing to life in you.

### Some useful resources

Books like Stephanie Dowrick's 'Creative Journal Writing' or Oriah Mountain Dreamer's 'What We Ache For' can be rich resources for journal writers.



Stephanie Dowrick (2009) Creative Journal Writing: The art and heart of reflection.  
Jeremy P. Tarcher



Oriah Mountain Dreamer (2005) What We Ache For: Creativity and the unfolding of your soul. HarperSanFrancisco

Lucia Capacchione (2002) The Creative Journal: The art of finding yourself. New Page Books

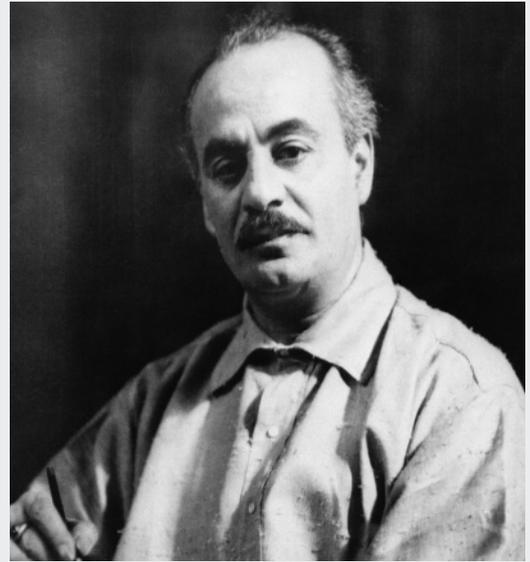
# Discovering the mystics:

## Khalil Gibran

Kahlil Gibran was a world renowned 20<sup>th</sup> century Lebanese philosopher, writer, poet, artist and social reformer. Over his relatively short lifetime, he published seventeen books, nine in Arabic and eight in English. In Lebanon, he is seen as having had an important influence on Arabic poetry and literature and is celebrated as a literary hero. He is also credited with birthing the prose poem.

Gibran's life was far from an easy one. He was born and brought up in an Eastern Catholic family living in Lebanon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His mother was the daughter of a Catholic priest and a deeply religious and loving woman. Despite her lack of formal education, she evidenced a natural intelligence and wisdom and a mystical spirituality that had a profound impact on the young Gibran. His father was a tax collector. He was a temperamental, unloving and autocratic man with little time for his son's artistic nature and gifts. His frequent bouts of violet drinking and heavy gambling left the family living in fear and poverty and after his eventual imprisonment for embezzlement when Gibran was only twelve, his mother made the difficult decision to emigrate to the USA in search of a better life for her family.

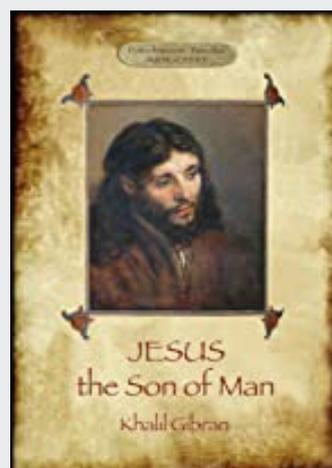
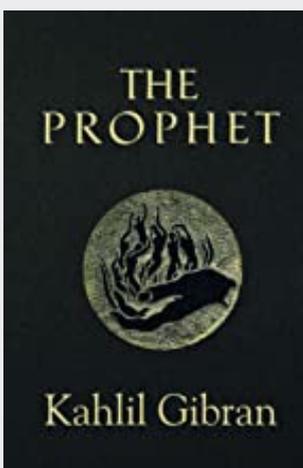
In addition to this early childhood trauma, by the age of twenty, he had lost his mother, older brother and youngest sister to tuberculosis, all within the space of two years. Having studied Arabic poetry and literature in Beirut and art in Paris in his late teens and early twenties, for much of his adult life, he lived a lonely, hermit-like existence in his small apartment and studio in New York City which he called 'The Hermitage'. In



exile from his beloved birthplace, he never became an American citizen and often struggled with persistent homesickness and melancholia.

Gibran devoted his life to his writings and art. He launched his first art exhibition at the age of twenty one and published his first book of essays in Arabic one year later. Thirteen years later, he published his first book in English. His best known book, 'The Prophet' has been translated into over a hundred languages and is one of the best selling books of all time. His most challenging and cherished book, however, was 'Jesus the Son of Man' in which he retells the story of Jesus through the eyes of his contemporaries. 'My art can find no better resting place than the personality of Jesus,' he wrote'. 'He shall always be the supreme figure of all ages and in Him we shall always find mystery, passion, love, imagination, tragedy, beauty, romance and truth.'

The key themes running through Gibran's writings are those of the spiritual life, universal love, beauty, liberty, home-coming and the sanctity and beauty of the natural world. He believed in the innate goodness and essential divinity of human beings and in the Sufi principle of the oneness or unity of all being. He was convinced that beneath the various forms of religion that exist, there is an underlying unity. He once described himself as keeping 'Jesus in one half of his bosom and Muhammad in the other' and one of his deepest desires was that of reconciling Christianity and Islam and merging Sufi mysticism with the Christian mystical tradition.



Gibran saw human consciousness as continually evolving and expanding beyond its cultural contexts and argued passionately for interfaith tolerance, harmony and co-operation. He was deeply critical of those spiritual authorities who promote fanaticism, extremism, religious prejudice and bigotry which led some of his fiercest critics to describe his writings as 'dangerous, revolutionary and poisonous.'

He was also a fervent, outspoken champion of human rights who attacked injustice of all kinds and promoted non-violent protest and reform. He decried what he saw as the vicious inequalities between men and women and became a champion of women's liberation. He also saw humanity as having a duty to protect, revere and celebrate Nature which he believed to be a universal source of creative energy.

In a line from his book, 'Sand and Foam', which is a collection of poems, parables and sayings, he writes, 'Half of what I say is meaningless, but I say it so that the other half may reach you.' The 'other half' continues to speak powerfully to people from all over the world nearly a hundred years after his death. Lines from 'The Prophet' have inspired song lyrics and political speeches, They have been read out at weddings and funerals all around the world.

Often dismissed by critics during his lifetime, he has become the third best-selling poet of all time. In part, this is because Gibran writes in a simple, accessible and evocative way about many of the

universal themes of human life that matter deeply to all of us - themes such as as love, pain, good and evil, joy and sorrow, marriage, children, friendship and death. In part, it is because the spiritual language he uses is inclusive enough to speak to us whatever our spiritual tradition may be. And in part, it is because the wisdom and beauty to be found both in his writings and in his art touch something deep within us. They move the heart and stir the soul and articulate something of the deeper knowing and wisdom that is within all of us.

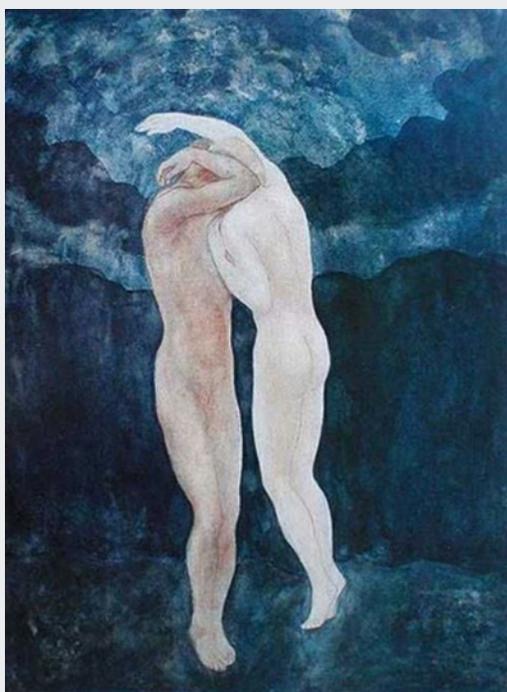
Tragically, Gibran died at 48 from liver cancer exacerbated by bouts of excessive drinking which eventually led to alcoholism. Though he was a deeply wounded and troubled man, the strong faith that sustained him and the inner beauty and wisdom of his soul shine clearly through the writings and paintings that are his gift to the world. And as a Christian, he was undoubtedly one of the most progressive thinkers and social activists of his time.

You can find further information about Gibran along with a number of his poems on the following poetry websites:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kahlil-gibran>

<https://mypoeticside.com/poets/khalil-gibran-poems>

and you can find images of some of his artwork via Google images.



*'Love possesses not nor would it be possessed; For love is sufficient unto love... And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course.'*

*Love has no other desire but to fulfil itself. But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires: To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night. To know the pain of too much tenderness. To be wounded by your own understanding of love; And to bleed willingly and joyfully.'*

*Illustration and extract from 'The Prophet'*