HOW BIG YOUR GOD IS

CHRISTIAN & SPIRITUAL POEMS

BY HARLAN RICHARDS
November 30, 2014

Dennis Sobin, Director
Safe Streets Arts Foundation
2512 Virginia Ave., NW, #58043
Washington, DC 20037

Dear Mr. Sobin:

Please find enclosed my manuscript, How Big Your God Is, for posting on your website.

I am also enclosing a SASE.

Thanks for all your help and may God bless you and all you do.

Sincerely,

Harlan Richards
100 Corrections Dr.
Stanley, WI 54768
How Big Your God Is

A Selection of Christian and Spiritual Poems

Written by

Harlan Richards

Contact information:

Harlan Richards 37975
Stanley Correctional Institution
100 Corrections Dr.
Stanley, WI 54768

Blog: betweenthebars.org/blogs/637

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In 2010, after 26 years in prison, Christ called me as one of His own. When I answered His call, He gave me the gift of poetry. Since then, I have written hundreds of poems, had dozens of them published and completed 2 books and a chapbook. This book contains many of my inspired poems.
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Harlan Richards
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Introduction

In 2010, I became a Christian and accepted Christ as my savior. The Lord put it in my heart to write poetry - something I believed I was incapable of doing. Nevertheless, I joined a creative writing group and began writing. Much to my surprise, poems flowed out of me and onto the page. Within a few months, I had my first poem accepted for publication and since then I've had dozens of poems published in various print and online journals. This ebook contains some of my best Christian and spiritual poems.

This book is my second ebook of poems. My first ebook, What Prison Teaches, consists entirely of poems about prison. I have been imprisoned over 30 years for stabbing a man in a fight. I came to Christ in prison and He changed my life. I dedicate this book to God and all those who sincerely believe in Him and follow His commandments. May God bless every person who reads this book.

-1- Harlan Richards
How Big Your God Is

The preacher said
Don't tell God how big your problem is,
Tell your problem how big your God is.
Let me bear witness that
We all have problems, and to
Each of us it seems our problem is
So big we can't get a handle on it.
The Lord showed me tonight, as I
Listened to 5:13 sing His praises,
That when we raise our voices
In the name of the Lord, all things
Are possible with God.
The blind see, the lame walk, the
Prison gates open at the Lord's Word.
We are free to run, free to dance,
Free to raise our voices to the Lord.

Harlan Richards
Eternity

From the dark pits of hell
   where I once reveled and ruled,
I scrabbled up unascendable cliffs
   toward the light.
Remorseless and angry,
   unrepentant for decades,
Attacking, taking, devouring,
   reaving with rampant rage.
'Til the Lord's lightning split
   black heart's hardened shell,
Awakening me to
   the horror I had become.
No more exalting, exulting in
   domination and destruction.
No more sadistically barbed words
   inflicting cruel torment.
Forgiven by God and self, washed
   fresh and clean, healed anew,
Given a last chance to
   redeem my soul. It's now or never.
Praise God my ego rules no more,
   but heeds the call of His pure love.
Not my will but
   Thine be done.
I pray Thee grant me the power to
   serve, not self, but all whose need
Cries loudly to the heavens from the dark
   pits of hell which once held me in thrall.
For one gift of kindness may man
   forsake his madness toward others.
If the insidious evil which was my self
   can find redemption, then all may find it.
I pray Thee heal others as I was healed,
   help me to help them
Sup at the table of loving forgiveness ere
   the last supper come and go,
   thence it will be too late.

Harlan Richards
I Pray To Thee

I pray Thee God to light my way,
Through my trials and my pain.
Keep me alive another day.

I'll do your will come what may,
As I smile through the pouring rain.
I pray Thee God to light my way.

I give my life and to the Lord obey,
That my sacrifice may bring forth gain.
Keep me alive for another day.

I never knew how to portray,
My heart's desire so I did abstain.
I pray Thee God to light my way.

But now my life has become so gay,
That spirit nevermore will wane.
Keep me alive for another day.

Adversity will not inveigh,
Nor thwart my path to attain.
I pray Thee God to light my way.
Keep me alive for another day.

-4-
A New Psalm

How many times, Lord,  
Will you allow my ego to rise up,  
Cerebus-headed, fangs dripping  

To drive you off and leave me  
Trapped in this dark pit of hell  
From which I so recently escaped?  

How long, Lord, will I struggle  
Alone in the darkness, cut off  
From your cleansing light?  

Hear me, Lord, I am one of yours,  
Crying out for release from  
Satan's evil grip.  

I am powerless without your love,  
Desperate without your grace,  
Condemned without your help.  

I pray Thee, Lord, bring me back  
Into the fold, ere the evil one  
Have his way and destroy me.
From Saul to Paul

I was once much like
Saul of Tarsus before
He became Paul, foremost of
God's messengers.
Jesus was patient, persistent,
Admant that I was one of
His Chosen.
Though He never struck me blind
On the road to Damascus, He
Worked His will in my life and
Brought me into His fold.
Like a newborn lamb
Kept safe by my shepherd,
I learned to walk the path of
Righteousness He paved for me
With the blood of His sacrifice.

-6-
The Pentecost

The apostles were at their lowest,
Feeling bereft, their master ascended,
Expecting the Pharisees and priests to
Come for them, put an end to them.
But the Lord had other plans
For His Chosen, sending His
Holy spirit to dwell in them.

Fear fell away, rich deep voices
Rang out, giving glory and honor
To the Lord, apostles stepped out
Boldly, speaking in tongues,
Spreading the Good News, converting
Thousands as they went about
Their father's business.

We celebrate it still, Pentacostal Sunday,
Giving all honor and glory to the
Indwelling of God in man.
Our rich, deep voices ring out, echoing
Those apostolic voices of long ago,
Giving glory to God, calling
All of His own back to Him.

Harlan Richards

-7-
Test My Mettle

Go ahead, test my mettle.
Make it as bad as you want,
Lock me in prison for a quarter century,
Don't let me see my daughter for a decade,
Make me scrape dirty dishes, eat crappy food,
Tease me, let me taste freedom,
Then take it away again,
Show me a light at the end of the tunnel,
Then reveal it's an oncoming train.
Doesn't matter, can't touch me,
Nothing you can do can take my joy,
Mar my mirth,
Extinguish my exuberance.
God gave me His Grace,
When I gave Him my life,
And you can never take my joy again.

Harlan Richards
Miracles

There are miracles in my life
Gracing me, gifting me, uplifting me
Like winning a million dollars
After buying one lottery ticket.
I share my good fortune with
Everyone I meet, knowing
The more I give, the more I get.
Holy Spirit grants miracles,
Agents of change catalyze lives,
Opens hearts, like a long-buried
Treasure chest.
My words, my love, my intentions,
Are Holy Spirit's tools
For making miracles.
We share miracles
Like a common pot of stew,
Each dipping in as need and
Hunger require.

-9- Harlan Richards
Help Me

Holy Spirit help me,
Fill my heart like a
Summer storm fills a rain barrel,
Slake my thirst for love the way a
Marathon runner slams Gatorade,
Hear my supplication with the urgency of
A newborn's cry in the night,
Help me see my way to God's loving embrace
With the keen sight of a soaring eagle,
Bring me the joy of salvation with
The abundance Santa brings to Christmas,
Teach me how to have miracles in my life
The way the Beatles taught a generation
All you need is love.
Holy Spirit help me,
I'm blind as a day-old kitten
Crying for its mother,
Lost, not knowing the answers,
Or the questions.

Harlan Richards
Sometimes

Sometimes I'm unmotivated, lazy,
Just want emotional gratification
Without working for it.

Sometimes I know what needs to be done,
Am able to do it, but
Lack the desire to act.

Sometimes I'd rather not be strong,
Not step up to make a difference,
Let whatever happens, happen.

Then I remember who I am,
What I stand for,
Who I answer to.

Let others languish,
The Lord calls me to His cause,
And I will always answer.

Harlan Richards
It's Always the Same

When I look back on my life,
it's always the same.

I swear to love God
Live true to His Word
Until my ego takes over
And I start acting absurd.

I'm fearful and puny,
Alone in my misery
See only the evil
Surrounding me.

I now know the lesson
Learned by the Jews
When they forgot their God
And all His rules.

Forgive me my Lord
For my faithless betrayal
Fill me with love
Help me be loyal.

I have only this moment
With solemn intent
To Love the Lord
In the way that He meant.

-12-
Second chances

God dealt harshly with Jonah,  
And for good reason.  
When your Maker calls you  
To service, you answer,  
Not with a stiff neck or  
Hard heart, but with a  
Desire to please, grateful for  
The chance to show your love.  

Sometimes I act like Jonah,  
Am ashamed of myself for  
Stinting my devotion, yet  
Lack the resolve to step up.  
That's when I'm most thankful  
For a merciful God.  
Even if at times I disappoint,  
He always forgives me and  
Lets me try again.  

Harlan Richards
Lord Knows

Lord knows, I've made some mistakes
In my life, sometimes thinking
I was doing the right thing,
Finding a way to justify my sin.
Now I know better,
At least I think I do.

But still, there's
A long row to hoe
Before I meet my Maker,
And it seems the more I learn
The less I know.
New mistakes crop up, run deep,
Not so much because I'm such
A sinner these days, but because
I can now see old wrongs
    with new eyes.

Harlan Richards
Love Thy Neighbor

Turning the other cheek seems
More metaphor than an actual
Commandment from God.
Harsh words lead to harsh deeds
And when we let ourselves hate
Those who think differently,
Respond in kind when misunderstanding
Begets animosity, we lose sight of
Those with whom we speak.
We are all Adam's children,
Saved by a loving God,
Whose message came by
The lips of Jesus
Commanding us to
Love thy neighbor as thyself.

Harlan Richards
Trust In the Lord

The Lord clears my path
The way a snow plow
Clears drifted highways.
The clutter of my life
May creep back in after
A while the way a road
May drift over again,
But sure as the plow
Will come through again,
The Lord will be there to
Help me along.

I once thought it was my job to
Work my way to the Lord, failing
When my strength gave out, losing
My way when my resolved faltered.
Then He came unto me, bidding me to
Put my faith in Him, lean on
His strength and wisdom.
Now I see it's not by my strength
That I am saved, but rather
By His mercy.

Harlan Richards
Insensible

I don't know how many ways
There are to count my blessings,
   Two-by-two,
   All in a row,
   What-have-you.
What I do know is that
I'm grateful to have so many
Blessings to count that even on
My worst day I still can't
Recite them all before I'm
Carried away thanking my
Holy Father:
   The source of all creation.
   All meaning in my life, who
   Provides so plentifully for me.

Harlan Richards
Benediction

I have so many blessings in my life that
I fall asleep before they're all counted.
I wonder whether others count their blessings
Like I do, only take more time because of
More blessings?
Yet I can't help but mourn those whose
Eyes cannot see the Lord's blessings
In their lives, choosing instead a path of
Envy, bitterness and blindness.

Thank you Lord for the gifts you
Have bestowed upon me.
I pray you multiply my blessings
A hundred-fold that I may pass
Them on to others, to open their hearts
To the infinite blessings of
Your Son's presence.
Blessings In Disguise

Sometimes it seems that the
Most pernicious evil imaginable
Infects our lives, causing
Untold misery and grief.
It's so hard to see meaning
In times like this, feeling like
An urban cowboy following
The trail of a wounded deer.
Sure, the blood's there, and a
Hoof print or two, but finding
The deer is about as likely as a
Pig farmer hosting the academy awards.
Still in all, at the end of the
Road, it often happens that
We are able to see
How lucky we were when we thought
We were done so wrong.
Hubris

Once upon a time, all my
Prayers to God were all about me,
What I wanted, how I could be helped,
And I suppose it's okay to pray for
What one needs.

But my prayers bore very
Little fruit, as if God was not omnipresent,
Was on His lunch break.
But so many of those I love
Are struggling, suffering, needing
More than they can provide
For themselves.

Soon, I forgot about me
- Except to thank God for my blessings -
And began to pray for others.
God heard me, healed those
I loved, and before you
Knew it, I was praying for
Everyone I saw in need.

Yet I'm not perfect, because
Now I take such joy in my power
To bring God's blessings to others
When in reality I have no power at all,
But rather sit at the feet of the master
Praying that His will be done.

Harlan Richards

-20-
Nightly

Once upon a time, I
Tossed and turned in torment,
Never a full night's sleep,
Always awakening, sleepless too often.
Then I resolved each time
I rolled over, to thank the Lord,
Count my blessings, for a life
Well-lived, suffused with
Meaning, saturated with love.
Now each nocturnal waking moment is
Given to the greater glory of God,
Until I doze off again in the
Loving arms of a forgiving God.
Book of Fools

I've made so many mistakes in
My life, found the land of
Milk and honey, then wandered off
Into the wilderness.
Each time I get some sense
Knocked into me, I step back,
Ask myself how I could have
Strayed so far from the Lord.
He must have written my name
In the Book of Fools by now,
The place where you find all the
Children of God with hearts of
Gold, and not a lick of sense.
Yet my Lord is a forgiving master,
Absolving me again and again.
Perhaps if I had a little more
Holy Spirit and a little less
Free will, maybe I could erase
My name from the Book of Fools and
Watch as the Lord records it
In the Book of Life.

-22- Marlan Richards
Enslaved

I am a slave by choice,
Thankful I'm not in charge.
Once, I thought I was master of
My destiny, my future, my reality,
As I drowned myself in liquor,
Smothered myself with smoke,
And saturated my body with
Toxic, blissful chemicals.
Yet I was but a slave
To many masters.

Then, freed of intoxication's yoke,
I fancied myself once more
Master of the universe,
While I languished, in bondage to
My desires, beliefs and ego.
Still enslaved, still suffering.

Lost in discouragement, at last I
Surrendered, gave up on winning
The contest called life, not caring
What the outcome would be,
Wising to end the endless pain.
I entered voluntary servitude in
The army of the Lord, my God.

Since then, I've never looked back
And never regretted serving my master,
A slave to His Will.

Harlan Richards
Low Rider

Everybody has seen them
At one time or another.
Those tricked-out low riders,
Customized and detailed to
Within an inch of perfection.
Acres of chrome,
Coats of lacquer,
Artistry so sublime it's divine.

Jesus built me
Like a low rider,
Pounded out my dents with
The hammer of retribution,
Ground off old paint and rust
From my Godless life.

All the while He was
Getting me ready, applying a primer of
Biblical knowledge, each day adding
Another lacquered layer of understanding,
A fresh coat of learning,
Giving depth to my faith,
Revealing the beauty of His work
On my soul.

I may never win first place
In a car show, or
Shine with glitz and glam,
But one thing's for sure,
I'm one smooth ride for the Lord.

Harlan Richards
Rebuilding My Chassis

Like busting loose a
Rusted tie-rod end on my
1969 Chevy van,
Breaking free of my faults
Takes some of the Lord's
WD-40 and a whole lotta effort.
I can put in a new ball joint to
Keep my front end from wobbling
The way I can insert some new values to
Keep my faith from wavering.
If I could fix my broken self as
Easily as I fix my old van
Jesus's job of saving me
Would be a whole lot easier.

Harlan Richards
Perdition

The hardest thing of all,
Is to let the Holy Spirit
Call the shots.
I want what I want
When I want it,
In the way that I want it,
Everyone else be damned.

That's what got me into
This mess in the first place.
Decades later, the lesson
Has yet to be learned.

Would that I could see my faults
As easily as I pick them out in others.
Then perhaps the lessons would
Not come so hard,
I wouldn't suffer so much,
And I wouldn't be forever taking
The road to perdition.
No Matter

No matter how bad it is,
There's always someone
Just a little worse off
Just a little more agonized,
So that even if you feel the
Thorns of injustice crowning
Your best effort, you know
There's always something to
Be thankful for and someone
You can pray for.

Harlan Richards

-27--
Judging Others

It makes me so angry, sometimes,
when I let somebody get my goat,
and only belatedly realize it was
a test, and that I failed.
Fortunately, I can retake the test
until I get it right.
I don’t have to be a perfect
test-taker, all I need to do is
get it right in the end.
Truly Blessed

I am truly blessed, and I
Thank the Holy Spirit, after
So many years of depression,
Anger, hopelessness,
While I fought furiously for
Satisfaction, pleasure, happiness,
Taking all the world had:
Surfeit of sex,
Gluttonous gorging,
New clothes, new cars, new drugs,
The latest movie, hottest hit song.
Always seeking, craving, wanting,
While I stayed empty as a drum,
Until I stopped looking out, turned in,
And didn't like who I saw.
Desperate, despondent, determined to die,
I killed myself, incinerated my ego,
Let Phoenix rise from ashes of despair.
There, behind the clutter of my life,
I found the Holy Spirit,
And felt the words,
Not my will, but Thine, be done.

-29- Harlan Richards
An Angel of the Lord

I was there when it all began,
Saw Lucifer the Lightbringer
When he fell, and watched as
He reigned supreme on earth.
I did what I could, acted
In the name of the Lord as
He commanded me to do.
I carried the warning to Lot ere
The Lord's wrath destroyed Sodom.
I led Isaac to his wife
At the Lord's command.
I wrestled Jacob at the well
And watched over him as he
Grew into Israel, the Lord's
Faithful servant.
I stood before Balaam's ass
And made an ass out of Balaam
In the name of the Lord.
I was in the fiery furnace
Protecting Shadrach, Meshach & Abde-Nego.
Mostly, I watched and waited,
Appearing briefly to set Mary's heart
At ease and then encouraging
Joseph to stand by her.
I was one of those who
Ministered to Jesus when
The devil tempted him.
It was me who rolled away
The stone, being the last time
I was on earth.
Still, I watch and wait, carrying
In my heart the Lord's promise that
I would be in the vanguard when next
He returns to claim His kingdom.

Harlan Richards
What Makes A Hard Man Crumble

Many are the Evil Ones,
Careless of others, willing to
Kill, main, torture, for
One cause or another,
Even just a big, fat
Paycheck. Evil Ones
Have no qualms about
Fighting to the death, enduring
Privation, isolation, subjugation,
Coming out stronger, meaner,
More willing to kill,
Maim, torture. Yet the
Love of a forgiving God,
When once received,
Breaks that man
Whom no amount of
Adversity could cow.
When Jesus comes to call
A hard man crumbles,
Surrendering his will to a
Higher calling, anointed
By the Lord's lovingkindness,
Going forth to witness
His salvation to all men.

Harlan Richards

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The Tree of Life

Sometimes I feel like
A tree branch ripped off
In a storm, torn away from
My Lord's loving grace which
Kept me rooted to my faith,
Nurtured and sustained, as
I did the photosynthetic
Work the Lord created me for.

Though I fear being cast
In a rubbish heap or left to
Rot on the ground, the Lord's
Aborist always picks me up and
Crafts me back onto the
Rootstock from which I
Was sundered.
Run, Demon, Run

They say demons run when
A good man goes to war.
Jesus came to earth to fight
Satan for our souls but
The evil one's minions, lost in
Their own self-importance,
Stood up to our Savior
And paid the price.
Jesus called down the
Power from above to
Send those below. Demons
Destroyed, demons devastated,
The Lord rules, on earth as
He does in heaven.

Harlan Richards
The Lord's Vessel

It sometimes takes me longer to
Write a paean honoring God
Than it took Him to create
Heaven and earth. I am
A lump of clay, waiting to
Take my turn on the Lord's
Pottery wheel, molded into a
Vessel of divine inspiration,
Fired in the kiln of earthly
Temptation, glazed with
Scriptural instruction, now
Destined to serve at the Lord's table.

Harlan Richards
Bible Study

I haven't had the Lord's Word
In my life nearly as much
As I need to.
The Lord has a way of giving me
What I need, even when it isn't
What I want, in the way I want it.

A reluctant Christian
Is anathema to God,
Redolent of stiff-necked Jewry of
The Old Testament who didn't know
The value of being the Lord's Chosen.

The Lord led me to Bible study,
Even picked the course for me and
Let me think it was my idea.
Now, His Word is in my heart,
Verses repeating like mantras,
The scales have fallen from my eyes
Revealing God's glory everywhere I look.

Harlan Richards
Taming a Raging Torrent

Peace flows through me
The way the Eau Claire River
Flows through Gordon valley.
It wasn't always like this.
Once, I was a raging torrent,
Dashing myself against rocks,
Shooting rapids, sailing out
Over the waterfall of strife.
Yet the Lord helped me
Get beyond the rough water,
Built dams of Scripture,
Tamed the ferocity. No longer
Do the storms of adversity
Overflow my banks to spread discord,
No longer am I blinded by
Lightning strikes over which I
Have no control. With the Lord's
Calming hand, I have been tamed.

Harlan Richards

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Madness

I hear the music of madness
In the distance, watch
Others dance to its tune,
Wondering why they chose to
Travel to the beat of a broken drum.

Sanity is consensus of the
Masses, calling to what's
Best in us, reaching out
In spider web of assumptions
Madness cannot fathom.

Once, the music of madness
Played loudly in my ears,
Tempted me to strip off sanity,
Dance naked as David before God.

Reluctantly called back by Holy Spirit,
Snubbed seductive siren sound,
Gathered up another handful of resolve
And made my way toward the light.
Message From God

I received a message from God today,
When He sent His Sacred Angel,
A woman hated and vilified by many,
To rescue my Bible.
The Holy Spirit
Moves people to do His will,
Giving each of us what we need
To find His pure sweet love.

Mere mortals cannot
Judge the wisdom of God's choices.
The Holy Spirit sent her to
Liberate my Bible — my first in decades.
I did not doubt His wisdom,
Merely thanked Him for His assistance.

Harlan Richards
Forgiving Myself

It all began with me forgiving myself
  For the horrendous deeds,
  The selfish thoughts,
  The outsized ego,
  Which freed me to stop owning
Who I was, what I did, what I thought.

Catholics have their confessional,
  Put the imprimatur
On their forgiveness.
  The rest of us find God
By going within, listening
To the voice of the Holy Spirit,
  And heeding His word.
It all begins by forgiving yourself.

Harlan Richards

-39-
Coming to God

When the Lord called me,
I didn't hear Him,
Was too busy being me,
Getting what I wanted,
When I wanted it.

Then the Lord struck
The scales from my eyes,
Let me see His truth:
That all that I am,
Or ever shall be,
Is a blessing from Him.

Thus do I now plead
With my heavenly father
For the privilege
To do His will,
Every day of my life,
Every way in my life, for
Every person in my life.
Can You Feel It Coming?

It came on the breeze,
Stealthily, so subtly you
Couldn't notice it until
It was already there, as if
It always had been.
It's a mystery how something unseen
Can ripple into existence, changing
All it touches, much like mustard gas
Poisoned soldiers in the First World War,
Damage done on the first breath.

This time, it wasn't destruction
By man's hand but salvation by God's,
His cleansing forgiveness washed
Away sin from every heart, healing
Every hurt, revealing
Every truth for all to see.
Salvation is here and now,
Natural as a deep breath and
Coming to you on the next breeze.

Harlan Richards

-41-
Be Merciful, O Lord

I gush with the abundant life
God intended for me, like a grizzly
Gorging itself on spawning salmon.
As I prayed with fervor, Montana
Singled me out, prophesying the
Word of the Lord, heartening me,
Letting me know my suffering is
God-wrought, part of His plan to
Hone me to a razor's edge, temper me
With His Holy Fire the way a warrior's
Sword is forged into a mighty weapon.
Thus may I find the courage to
Proclaim His Word, declaim all
Deniers, eat honey and locusts,
Foretelling the Lord's return.

Harlan Richards
A Christian

When a Christian faces adversity
He sometimes says satan
Is working against Him or
The Lord is testing Him.
Never does stuff just happen,
Random vagaries of chance
Defining the debate.
It's always relevant, immediate
And a message from God.
Christians are powerless without:
God's helping hand, can only
Reach Him through Jesus, the Son,
And hardest of all, must do
His will instead of their own.
The Lord called me to His flock,
Unwilling as Jonah was I,
Yet slowly, steadily, He
Brought me into His fold,
Until His will became my will
And I struggled no more.
My Protector

I can feel my guardian angel
Hovering nearby, though he's
Too large to actually hover.
Big and bright, sorta off-white,
I glimpse him from the corner of
My eye, feel his presence
As he watches over me,
Silent encouragement while I
Read the Lord's Word,
Face down my demons, grasp
In frantic desperation for
Salvation from the Lord.
It's such a wonder, after wanting and
Wishing for awareness of the
Holy Spirit helping me, to
Finally feel the presence of
The Lord's power in my life.
I pray thee, God, may it ever be thus.

Harlan Richards

-44-
Christmas Candy

Dolly sang about a
Hard candy Christmas
Like it was something bad
And I suppose it is — for
A poor child clad in rags.

I want to sing about
An all candy Christmas
Where everything is sweet
To the taste, soft
To the touch, and
Pleasant on the heart.

Harlan Richards
Having Faith

It was a sheltered glen
Where it all began,
A most unlikely meeting
Making me think there
Is a God and His hand
Was directing my steps.

Seems so strange, in this
Era of cell phones, texting, and
Mars landings, to think that
My belief in God, what Lenin
Called the opiate of the masses,
Is what means most to me,
Guides my steps, gives me
Reason for so much gratitude.

As I said, it all began
In a sheltered glen . . .

Harlan Richards

-46-
The Dichotomy of My Muse

They say we have
An angel on each shoulder,
One good, the other bad.
One to help us rise to our best self,
The other manifesting hell on earth.
I found my good one
When by the grace of God
I became a poet.
But she of the sunlight
Could not live in
The darkness called Stanley.
I saw her evil twin
Leap onto the page.
In the age-old battle between
Good and evil, I found myself losing,
Bitterness and anger
Creeping into my verse.
I surrendered the battle
I could not win and
Gave myself over to God,
Let Thy will, not mine, be done.
The Lord took up my pen and
Vanquished all the evil.
Once again His love fills
My heart, inspires my words
And powers my pen
With such faith that I will
Never again be stayed from
My appointed task.

-47-

Harlan Richards
Love So Large

I want a love so large
It makes me feel small,
Insignificant, like a bonsai
Dwarfed by a redwood,
So many times bigger
There's no comparison.

I want the Lord in my life
To lighten my load,
Level the playing field
Let His grace, grace us all,
With His love so large,
For His children so small.
Sing For Me

I love the sound of birds singing
   Early in the morning
Like miniature alarm clocks
   All going off at once
In a cacophony of exuberance.
The tree outside my window
   Is where they gather to
Greet the dawn, moving on
   To their daily lives after
Making sure I'm awake.
I hear the Holy Spirit in bird song,
   Feel God's love wrap 'round me
Like wings of mama bird
   Enfolding her chicks.
There's No Rainbow Without the Rain

Angry clouds rip across the sky,
Tearing the fabric of our contentment,
Releasing a maelstrom of
Disruption, cleansing in its
Destruction, making way for
A rebirth of nature's glory.
The sun pierces exhausted
Clouds, shining with new life,
A rainbow arcs
Across the sky, reminding us of
God's promise to His children.

Never again will the maelstrom
Unleashed by angry clouds
Flood the earth in retribution
For our disobedience.
Dark Night of the Soul

O dark night of the soul,
Agony beyond belief
Tore me apart like a ghoul.

Shattered me like a glass bowl
As I cried for relief
From the dark night of the soul.

Thus did I pay the toll
Stole my joy like a thief
Tore me apart like a ghoul.

O Lord make me feel whole,
Misery and suffering God's motif
In the dark night of the soul.

Bleak is the future, I lose all control
Force, fury, a niddering naif
Tore me apart like a ghoul.

As a ship wrecked on a shoal
Or a lord deposed from his fief
Tis the dark night of the soul
Tore me apart like a ghoul.

-51-

Harlan Richards
Paeon to the Lord

My Lord, you gave me life, that I
May one day give my life
In service to your will. I
Pray Thee, make it easy on me,
Spare me the awful wrath of a
Vengeful God toward unrepentant sinners.

My Lord, I give my life as you
Gave me life, that I may use it
In service to your will. I
Pray Thee Lord, do not give me more than
I can bear. I have failed in my weakness
So many times, sought vainly to carry
Your banner into battle, only to collapse
In craven cowardice, for in my weakness
I am nothing, without your strength
I am powerless to act.

Harlan Richards
Sweet Savor

Like a sweet savor
For the Lord,
My intentions I give
In an offering.
Let my paean ring out
From the cell halls of Stanley
To kingdom come and beyond.
I sing my love, dear Lord,
To the least of them,
Embrace my brethren
With the best of them.
The miracle I behold
Drawing up souls from below
Herald the archangel's arrival
Ensures my survival
In a spiritual revival.

Harlan Richards
Bible Man

They call him Bible Man,
Though I don't know why.
Perhaps he sells Bibles, or
Has memorized vast tracts of
Biblical lore, spouting impromptu
Screeds redolent with fire and brimstone.

Bible Man may be he who
Has devoted his life to the study of
The Bible, that the Word of
God fill his life with a
Fullness and joy unfound
In day-to-day dramas.

Bible Man, we can only hope,
Found the spiritual message in
The Bible, rather than the fanatical
Message, where so much abuse,
Pain and intolerance finds its
Twisted justification.
Lord Jesus

Nothing irks me like a sanctimonious
Bible thumper oozing spiritual
Superiority as if he has
The inside track on salvation
And the rest of us poor sinners
Can but fawn at the feet of his
Magnificence as we implore him
To touch us with his grace so that
We, too, may hope to be saved.

My Lord Jesus, I pray you will
Grant me your benediction
Allowing me to love all my
Brothers and sisters in Christ,
Even if my satan-driven ego
Wants to revile them for not
Meeting my Christianic standards.
Choosing Sides

The debate rages over
The Christian Bible,
Each faction arguing
Irrespective of logical
Fallacy, that God wrote it as
The complete literal truth,
While others seek to
Pierce the veil, look
Beyond mere words to the
Spirit which lives within.
I find it hard to believe
In literal interpretation or
Adhere blindly to dogma.
Jesus said it best when He
Urged us to love God with
All our heart & soul & mind,
And our neighbors as ourselves.
Of that, I feel the truth.
Any more, I cannot say.
Noisome News

I used to listen to the
Nightly news, on the edge of
My seat, as the latest
Crisis de jour played out.
Fiscal cliff, terrorist attack,
Hurricane from hell. I soon
Realized that nightly news
Wasn't that at all. It was
Sensationalism, voyeurism,
Obsessive fixation on empty
Emotional hot buttons.
Then I heard about sacred stylings,
Music so spectral it spun me into
Another sphere, shifted me up to a
Higher place, helped me find a
Special space, beyond the daily
Miasma of news media manifested
Fear mongering, freeing me to
Seek God's abundance with
All my heart.
God's Gift

God's gift, to those who seek it,
Is so simple it seems nothing at all.
Yet on second look it appears
Onion-like, layered with ever deeper meaning,
Multitudinous as the seeds of a pomegranate.

God's gift is the answer to every question,
Pro to every con, point to counterpoint.
Nebulous to direct observation, it
Fills the nook of every unnoticed cranny.

God's gift is free for the asking.
Though it has value beyond reckoning,
It cannot be bought at any price.
Those who have it count themselves
Wealthy beyond measure.
While those who don't
Are unaware of their poverty.

God's gift can be found in
The song of spring's first robin,
A blind man's gratitude for restored sight,
Or one who sheds self-imposed isolation.

God's gift is in each of us
Every day of our lives,
Waiting to be discovered, that it may reveal
The abundance which is our birthright.

God's gift is love.
Fellowship of the Lord

I read the Word,
Pray unto God, seeking, ever
Seeking to be of His flock.
I hear Him say as I prayed
That we are all one, must
Testify to His truth,
Share what we know in
Fellowship with the Lord.

-59-
Lord of Strife

The Lord in my life
Brings me such strife
I can't get free
Tell them, let me be.
My muse skedaddled
My plans are all addled
Dear Lord in my life
Deliver me from strife.
More of the Same

It's always the same
The anguish and doubt
Wondering what
It's all about.

So certain, so sure,
I seek the Lord
Only to find
I can't hear His Word.

Fall back in a funk,
Self pity, depression,
Another wrong step,
Made such an impression.

Back on track
Riding the rails
My spiritual path,
It never fails.

Harlan Richards
Salvation's Illumination

I am glowing like a
Thousand watt bulb,
Lighting up my world
With renewable energy.
I burn with the intensity
Of a magnesium flare
Throwing off heat and light
To those around me.
The Lord fuels my fire of
Devotion, emotion, salvation.
It's a miracle how
My Father's love can
Fulfill me, heal me,
Reveal Thee, and
I thank Him for it.
Omnipotent

I give thanks to God,
For trials I face,
Yet wish it was someone
Who knew me less well
Directing my life, so I
Would not always have
The most painful experience
I could bear, maybe dodging
The bullet once in a while,
Getting off lucky for a change.

God in His omniscience knows
How to probe the open sores
Seeping from my soul,
Making life relevant, immediate
And oh-so-unbearable.

I like to think God is
Infallible, only giving me
As much as I can bear, but
I know better, know all the
Suicides made in desperation by
People facing more than they
Could bear, proving God may know in
Excruciating detail my inner weakness,
But not how much I'm willing to bear.

-63-

Harlan Richards
A Kernel of Truth

The truth comes as a seed
Planted in your heart
To grow and mature
As your desire for God's
Cleansing light dictates.
This kernel contains
Destruction of delusions,
Brought to fruition,
Over time, by the Mighty
Hand of God.
Thus does He bring those
Who stray
back into the fold.
Trying So Hard

Each day, I pray to
My Heavenly Father,
Imploring Him, begging Him to
Have mercy on me,
Deliver me from
My suffering,
Restore me to
My rightful place.

My dear Lord, I pray you
Hear my plea, give me
The support David knew,
The vindication Joseph had,
The justice Isaiah proclaimed, and
The wisdom Solomon pronounced.

Help me crawl from
This pit of despair
Into your healing light
Bathing me in a golden glow
Suffusing me with your
Spiritual light, imbuing me
With divine insight, that
I might act with all
Your might, even unto
The final night.

Harlan Richards
Holy Art Thou

Upon all that is holy
And all I hold dear
I give you my word,
That which you see
Is all there is of me.

I may have dissembled,
Deceived and denied,
Flaunted false face
In days gone by.

It's a new day now,
And a fresh beginning,
Where truth will be told,
From my head to my toes.

Warlan Richards

-66-
Jesus Is Still Healing

Jesus performed miracles of Healing. Through His father’s Mercy, the lame walked, The blind could see.

Made me wonder why He Could not be here now, Healing our brothers and Sisters in Christ.

The Lord chided me for My doubting heart, as He Revealed a mighty truth to me. From God Comes all things:

Medicines, machines and doctors Performing miracles of healing, These are the Lord’s servants, Saving lives, curing cancer.

The lame walk, the blind see, Through the merciful God-given Gift of technology.

———

Harlan Richards

-67-
Keep Hope Alive

Every day is another battle
To keep hope alive, as I
Take yet another trudging
Step, stuck in mire so deep its
Sucking sound bears witness.

Mostly, I bear it all stoically,
Inured to resistance,
Oblivious to opposition
I've borne for so long
Its absence now would
Seem unnatural.

Yet there are those days
In my bipolar universe
Where it gets just a
Bit too hard and my world
Comes crashing down.
It's then that I dig deep,
Plumbing the depths of my
Heart like a bathysphere in
The Mariana Trench to find
The Lord's voice whispering,
Soothing, saving my sanity,
Letting me once more
Encourage others to:

Keep hope alive.

-68-  Harlan Richards
Magmatic Magniloquence

In ancient Pompeii, Mount Vesuvius
Erupted, burying the city for millenia.
The Lord erupted into my life
Burying my small-minded self for
All time in a magmatic flow of
Divine inspiration.
My verses celebrate His magnificence,
The sizzling lava of my words reflects
The creative flow He has placed in me.
Through Him, my imagination works in ways
I could never do on my own.

Harlan Richards

-69-
The Best of Us

There is good in each of us,
    Walled off and starved
    In some of us, lest
Others get the best of us.

There's an ebb and flow
    In others of us,
    One day acting for
The good of all of us,
    The next day hurting
    The best of us.

I put my trust
    In all of us
Knowing that the
Lord's works brings out
    The best in us.

Harlan Richards
Second Thoughts

Doubting Thomas stands as
A lesson to us all not to
Doubt when God shows
His glory to us.
Nevertheless, we must be
Ever vigilant not to
Believe when a false prophet
Seeks to lead us astray.
Jim Jones lured over a thousand of
His followers to South America
Where he forced them to
Drink the Kool-aid, while
David Koresh enslaved dozens and
Led them to fiery deaths
In his Waco, Texas compound.
Perhaps the lesson of Thomas
Is to make sure that the
Voice you hear is the Lord within
Your heart and not satan
Whispering in your ear.
A Fresh Start

I begin each day with
The Holy Word, praying that
Inspiration will suffuse
My thoughts throughout the day,
Hold demons at bay, letting me
Rise above the cess pit of
This dreary existence.
The Lord is everywhere, but
No where is He more needed,
More prayed for, more
Sought after than here, the
Worst place I've been in decades.

My daily walk skirts
The precipice of sanity,
So near that one strong
Gust of adversity could
Send me tumbling over the edge
Into fathomless despair
Where the only rescue is
The Lord's lifeline,
Prayerfully in reach,
Tearfully I beseech Him
In His mercy, to deliver me
From my own folly.
Baking the Bread of Life

Holy Spirit is preparing me
Like bread dough,
Kneading me to get me in shape
Then letting me rise to the occasion
Whence I will be baked to
Christian perfection.

He Prayed

He prayed
For God to punch his ticket
To the Promised Land, as
He crouched, despondent,
at the curb of life.
Happy Easter

I have spent my life
In a Christian country,
Experienced dozens of Easters,
Some as a Catholic, others
As a Thelemite, finally
As one of Christ's Chosen.

In all that time,
I still don't know, what's up
With the Easter Bunny?
I didn't read about him in
The Bible, didn't hear any
Sermons on the Bunny of God,
Who came to take away
The sins of the world and
Didn't see any bunny ears
On the pope's cap.
And what about all those
Hard-boiled eggs? Coloring them
Doesn't make them taste
Any better, and it doesn't seem
Much of a treat for being the
Best searcher in an Easter egg hunt.
If not for the resurrection of Christ,
I wouldn't have any use for Easter at all.

Harlan Richards
I (Almost) Lost Christmas

Until the Lord landed me here,
I had never understood why
Some guys chose anger
Over Christmas cheer.

I have always been thankful
For the excuse of Christmas
Which brought to others the
Joy I know all year long.

Stanley almost broke my spirit
Almost made me give up my life
Almost was more than I can handle,
Until I remembered who I'm not.

I'm not the person who came to prison
Not the selfish ego I used to be
Not the one who always put me first,
But the man who gave his life to God.

Lord you brought me to this place
To teach me about false pride,
To take me at my word when I said
Not my will but Thine be done.

And I thank you for it.

Harlan Richards

-75-
Christmas

They tell me Christmas season
Is a celebration of
The day Christ was born.
And I suppose it is,
But truth be told, we
Really don't know what day
Christ was born.
December 25th is as good a day
As any, and better than some,
But does it really matter what day
We choose to honor our Lord?
Each day is a celebration of
God's love in my life,
Healing me, heartening me,
Giving a greater purpose
To the things I do, a
Better path than I had before, and
A future where my salvation's secure.

Harlan Richards
Unrepentant On Christmas Eve

The world is a beautiful place
But you're too blind to see it,
   Too numb to feel it, and
   Too foolish to appreciate it.
   The Lord has called and
   Called again, for you to
   Come forth and follow Him.
   Time is running out, the
   Last dance has begun, repent
   Now, lest you die unshriven,
   Falling to the depths of hell
   From which you will never return.

Harlan Richards

-77-
At What Price?

Speak truth to power
Is a call to arms for
Many a liberal counter-culturist.
But must we also tear down
Our adversaries, spit on their
Values and spew venom to
Get our point across?
A loving God sent His only Son
To save us with a message of
Forgiveness and redemption.
Most of all, He gave to us
His love and commanded us
To love others as well.
By all means, chase the
Money-changers from the temple,
But do so with a silver tongue
And loving heart to the
Greater glory of a loving God.

Harlan Richards

-78-
Render Unto Caesar...

In a Christian yet secular land
Where acrimony bleeds into every
Corner of our lives, we endure
Countless attacks. Super-pac ads
Decry this candidate's honesty,
That candidate's integrity.
Each proclaims his Christian roots,
Vying for the high road and
Our dear Lord's tacit approval
While rendering unto caesar
Tainted hypocrisy, a willingness to
Skewer our foes,
Lambaste our opponents,
Nuke our enemies.
The Lord's commandments do not
Rest on the seventh day, nor
Any other day, least of all
Election day. Take a stand,
In the name of God,
Lest you win the contest
At the cost of your soul.

Harlan Richards

-79-
Ego

Every time I think I've finally
Committed myself irrevocably to a
Spiritual path my ego creeps in
And takes over.

It happened again this week
When I let another person,
A loving, caring human being
Who is doing the best he can with
What he has to work with,
Bring me down to his level
Instead of me lifting him up to mine.

Holy Spirit forgive me
Help me love him no matter
What my ego wants or thinks.
Let me love everyone, every day
And please, Holy Spirit, help me to
Help them reach atonement.
Thank you Lord.
Spiritual Pride

I pray that the Word of God
Spoken by the Holy Spirit
Saturates my soul, seeping into
My waking, walking, working world
Illuminating me with the compassion,
Love and forbearance I desperately seek
Letting me rise above the turmoil
Roiling my equanimity, no longer
Judging, despising, resenting others just
As lost and forlorn, left behind on
My selfish quest to realize atonement
In my life, knowing forgiveness is
The key, yet tenaciously hanging on to
Small-minded dreams of power,
Sucking up arrogance and
Spewing out the foul miasma of
Spiritual pride coating others with
The slime of my discontent.

Harlan Richards
A New Future

I can't change the past, but
I can build a new future
One day at a time,
Based on what I do,
From now on, by staying
In the now, being
In the know, putting
Others first, giving my
Life to God, following
The Holy Spirit, no matter
How painful, arduous, or unpleasant.

Harlan Richards

-82-
Transcendence

Transcendence is what I feel
When I look out across the
Eau Claire River Valley.
Pristine wilderness must look
As wild and untamed,
With eagles soaring over deer
Splashing in the shallows.
Each red-wing blackbird
Has his territory staked out,
Proclaiming his boundaries from
The highest perch he can find.
I pray to the Lord, letting
Sights and sounds drift through
My translucent self, like a
Trail of smoke gently
Wafting on a windless day.
Holy Spirit brought me here to
Experience God's unity among all
Living creatures, teaching me,
That I may teach others.

Harlan Richards
Highest Pinnacle

I reach to the highest pinnacle
Of my highest Self, so
I can grab onto what's there
And pull my thoughts up.

I'm the little boy who
Still needs a high chair
To sit at the family table.

Tired of crawling around
In the dirt and crumbs
Of my basest self, wanting
Instead a perch on the
Highest aerie I can imagine,
Where love and lofty thoughts
Flow to those below.

Harlan Richards

-84-
Worst Winter Ever

It was the worst winter ever,
That I can remember, and I can
Remember a lot of winters.
Not that it was so cold, or snowy,
That it would set records,
Although maybe it did.
The worst winter ever
Is a Stanley winter.
Poor clothing, feeling too cold,
Not much rec, not much fun,
Abysmal misery, compounded hopelessness.
It's the worst winter ever,
Because there is no escape
From the suffering.
The Lord visits here often,
Responding to desperate cries for relief
And while He fills my heart,
It's not so bad, not quite so sad.
Simplicity

Simplicity calls my name,
Urging me to abandon convolution,
Obfuscation and other opaque objects
Shielding my fragile,
Failing ego, keeping it safe
From the Lord's cleansing light.
Digging deeply, peeling
Layer upon layer of complexity
From tortured soul, seeking
Absolution, atonement and
My spiritual father's sacred Will.
No longer stuck in wiggling, wormy
Wanton self, debauching all that ever was,
Sacrificing earthly attachments
To sit through eternity
At the feet of my Maker.
Begrudging

So many of us hold grudges,
Family feuds, workplace conflicts.
Always their fault, not ours.

Owning our hurt, parading our
Victimhood like a badge of honor.
No forgiving, no forgetting,
Until we get our pound of flesh.

Yet it is all so easy,
Once we surrender to God,
To feel the warmth of His
Forgiveness, learn that
To forgive is to heal,
That we benefit ourselves
More than the malefactor,
As we are enfolded in the
Loving embrace of
A forgiving God.
Evil Walks At Night

The crone thrust her
Taloned hand deeply into my chest,
Piercing my heart as her
Fetid breath choked off
My last gasp. Hard,
Black pupils drilled
Into my eyes as I
Dangled before her.
No demon's voice could
Match her venomous outpouring.
Lost for all time in the grip of
An evil I could not fathom.
My piteous scream echoed out of
The depth of my despair.
Heard by the Lord above, He
Sent His avenging angel to
Free my soul from its torment.

I awoke to the sound of birds and
The sun streaming through my window.
To this day, I don't know whether I
Dreamed a bad dream or lived a
Nightmare, thankful only that the
Lord had mercy on one of His Chosen and
Delivered me from suffering.

Harlan Richards
Kiss An Angel Good Morning

I met an angel today, to
My surprise and relief,
Because I expected another
Battle royal, which is
Par for the course in this
Gladiator school of the mind.

She bathed me in
Compassion and empathy
Then took up her sword
And shield to fight
My battle for me.

In the aftermath of
Victory, I gave the credit to
God and thanked Him humbly,
Marveling once again
At His mercy and grace
Which I could not live without.

Harlan Richards

-89-
It's What You Make It

Evenings and weekends,
That's all I work, and
That's the way I like it.

Away from the boss,
On my own, sort of,
Free to be myself,
Give of myself,
Help myself,
To the richness
Which surrounds me.

I feel needed by patrons,
Searching for a book,
Reserving an elusive title,
Or seeking lovingkindness
In another's eyes.

It's not just a job, but
A chance to meet God every day
In every person I greet.

Harlan Richards
A Day Worth Celebrating

Another year older,
Another year better,
The time how it flies,
In our mortal lives.

My prayer for you,
I know that it's true,
May God bless you
And all your family, too.

Harlan Richards

-91-
Barking Up the Wrong Tree

You betcha sweet ass I do
Said I to my questioner as
The supplicant mistook me for a sage,
Seeking sagacity to dazzle his eye.
Sadly, all I could offer was
Shocking reproof to dull-witted stupor.
The neophyte, unfazed, implored for more,
Drop nuggets of wisdom, or crumbs
From a table, set by the Lord.
Humility, said I, is the best I can do,
I'm a true seeker, just like you.
Though I crave the attention
A yogi could garner, I must confess,
I'm still a larner.
Self-Doubt

I have heard it said that
   A good meal is like
   A sincere apology.
It leaves the recipient
Satisfied and the provider
In no way diminished.
I am in an agony of doubt
Because even though I gave
A sincere apology, I'm afraid
   It wasn't enough to
   Satisfy the recipient.
Perhaps I said too much,
Spoke too much truth to hurt,
When I should have applied
A thicker layer of lovingkindness.

Harlan Richards

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About the Author

Harlan Richards grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, during the turbulent 1960s. He frequently got into trouble as a teenager and ended up spending time in a state juvenile institution. He also served 4 years in prison in the 1970s. In 1984, at age 30, he was sent to prison for life for stabbing a man in a fight. In 1997, he earned a bachelor of science degree in business administration from UW-Platteville, graduating summa cum laude. He began writing poetry in 2010. He has one daughter and three grandchildren.

He also has a blog at betweenthebars.org/blogs/637