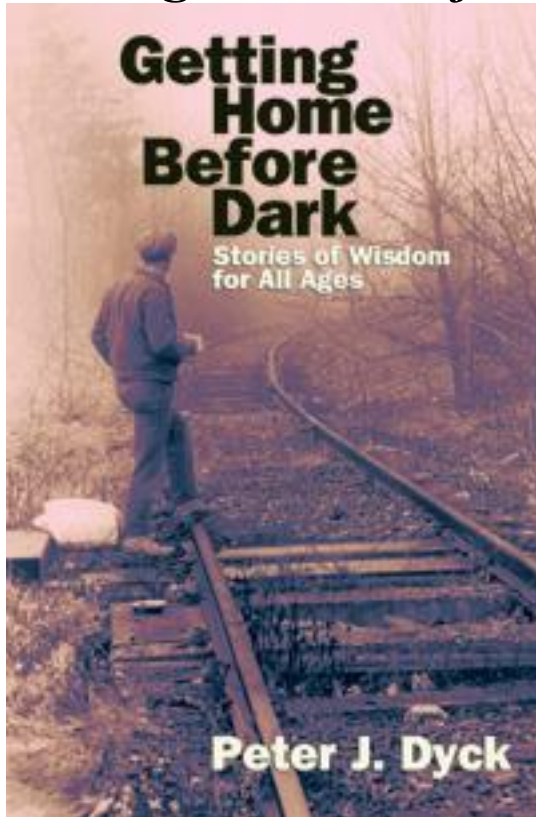


Getting Home Before Dark



By Peter Dyck

O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O LORD—how long? David, in Psalm 6:2b-3

As I get older, one of my favorite poems is "Let Me Get Home Before Dark," by J. Robertson McQuilkin. It begins with a positive statement of not being afraid of death because death means entering life eternal. Sundown and longer shadows alone do not frighten me. Still, the possibility of slipping morally, of making a fool of myself, or of becoming lukewarm spiritually—those things frighten me. After all, "there is no fool like an old fool" (John Lyly).

Thus McQuilkin admits:

"But I do fear.

I fear the Dark Specter may come too soon—

or do I mean too late?

That I should end before I finish or finish, but not well.

That I should stain your honor, shame your name,
grieve your loving heart.

For, they tell me, few finish well. . . .

Lord, let me get home before dark."

McQuilkin talks about the darkness we see in every personal care unit of retirement homes. Grouchy old men and women make life difficult for others and themselves. Once they were young and strong, kind and loving, but something happened. Their generous spirits shriveled, their minds became suspicious, and they became something we thought existed only in horror stories, not in reality.

The children don't know their own parents; emphatically they say that he or she was never like that before.

O Lord, please, don't let that happen to me. Let me get home before a darkness like that overtakes me.

McQuilkin describes this so eloquently:

"The darkness of a spirit
grown mean and small,

fruit shriveled on the vine,
bitter to the taste of my companions,
burden to be borne by those brave few who love me still.
No, Lord. Let the fruit grow lush and sweet,
a joy to all who taste;
Spirit—sign of God at work,
stronger, fuller, brighter at the end.

Lord, let me get home before dark.

I heard wonderful reports of a professor who was brilliant, stimulating, and always ready to help others. He was a great leader among our people. I enjoyed reading his writings, always positive and hopeful. Years later, when he was an old man, I met him and we worked together.

At his funeral, I spoke by his grave. But where was the man of whom I had heard such glowing reports when I was a youth? This man had become distrustful of others, mean and small in spirit, and suspicious of what I was doing. He didn't have a good word to say about anyone. What had happened? How sad that he could not get home before dark.

There is another kind of darkness, not so much of the spirit as of the mind. Webster defines dementia as "a condition of deteriorated mentality." Nature has turned the lights off. Alzheimer's disease is the most common expression of this dementia. Huntington's disease, Parkinson's disease, Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS), and multiple sclerosis might lead to other forms of dementia.

When I think even for a moment that my thinking and behavior could be impaired like that, I pray with all my heart, ***Lord, let me get home before dark.*** Our bodies are naturally getting weaker and more frail. Our minds slow down. Memory is not what it used to be. That is normal as we age, and I will accept it gladly. It all shows that "our outer nature is wasting away, . . . preparing us for an eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:16-17). I am ready.

I'm not afraid of death. I have peace with God. I can say with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). Nevertheless, I am afraid of what might happen before the end comes. That is why Elfrieda and I resonated so strongly with the closing thoughts of this wonderful poem:

"The outer me decays—
I do not fret or ask reprieve.
The ebbing strength but weans me from mother earth
and grows me up for heaven.
I do not cling to shadows cast by immortality. . . .
But will I reach the gate
in lingering pain, body distorted, grotesque?
Or will it be a mind
wandering untethered among light fantasies or grim terrors?
Of your grace, Father, I humbly ask . . .

Let me get home before dark.

From Peter Dyck's book, [Getting Home Before Dark.](#)