

## NOTES ABOUT ALVIN GREENE McNISH

For Memorial Service held April 21, 1993

In 1983, in the magazine "The New Age" Dr. Raymond W. Miller wrote an article called "**Contact with Thoughtful Minds.**" This article was about Alvin Greene McNish and seems appropriate to paraphrase in his memory.

When we consider that more than three-fourths of the earth's surface is ocean, it seems strange to hear of a scarcity of water. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge wrote of the terrible thirst of the old sailor becalmed on the seas where there was not wind to move his ship.

In the ninth stanza of Part II appears the paradox of "water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink."

.....

Of times today, the inability to make proper use of the riches of the world comes, not from the lack of practical technology, but from the lack of contact with men whose knowledge and good will could help get people fed and clothed....

Words, spoken or written, are a prime means of getting great and thoughtful minds to interact for the benefit of the world's people. But words can be random and scattered or they can be brought into focus and used as a lens, like the lens in a telescope that enables us to see the distant stars, or the lens in the microscope that sees into tiny cells.

These thoughts came into focus for me (Dr. Miller) some years ago when I was talking with the physicist, Alvin G. McNish, whose career included 16 years with the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D. C. and 23 years with the National Bureau of Standards.

In conversation, I asked Mr. McNish about his hobbies, and he said that writing poetry was one of them. Sensing that the poetry of such a scholar and authority would be most interesting, I asked him for a sample.

One of his poems not only delighted and charmed me, but filled me with awe. Over the years since then, I have wanted others to experience the same pleasure, and I have asked McNish to present the poem at various meetings of the monthly Forum of the Cosmos Club in Washington, D. C. The Club has a diverse membership, representing a wide scope of faiths, so the poem triggered many thoughtful comments.

Donald H. Williams, editor of the Cosmos Club Bulletin, asked to publish the poem. McNish sent it to Williams with a covering letter which is also a gem. ...I herewith present the thought of this observant physicist as he pondered the eternal work of the Great Creator.... which appeared in December 1975.

#### LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir:

I should like to set forth my views about wordsmiths. The merit of a wordsmith should be judged not be the number of words he produces but by a word's worth. Otherwise our bureaucrats would be the champions. They spawn words like herrings do eggs, few of which hatch and fewer still reach maturity.

To make my point I quoted a poem I composed a long time ago. You asked me to write it for you, so here it is:

#### *Theologoumenon*

I gazed into a telescope  
 As far as I could see,  
 I saw the giant star Betelgeuse  
 And spiraling nebulae.

The nebulae were whirling  
 And forming into land---  
 Beyond the whirling nebulae

Was God's almighty hand!

I stared into a microscope  
 And watched a cell divide  
 I saw the centrosomes withdraw  
 And form on either side.

The spindles were discriminant,  
 Mitosis had been planned,  
 For ultramicroscopic  
 Was God's almighty hand!

The first two stanzas were inspired by numerous visits to the U. S. Naval Observatory, the last two by the great biologist, Edwin Grant Conklin, in his interpretation of the process of mitosis. I was surprised and delighted when a motion picture of cell division made with a phase contrast microscope, shown shortly after World War II, revealed to me what Conklin's great genius had so perfectly interpreted and described over a quarter of a century before.

Sincerely,  
 A. G. McNish

Dr. Miller went on to discuss the meaning of the title of the poem, which in the singular form means to talk about God and means a statement of concept in the area of individual opinion, rather than a statement of authoritative doctrine. Dr. Miller discussed the poem with Gerald Hawkins, the astronomer, and Hart Armstrong, who wrote *How Great Thou Art!*, among others. In particular he said that Armstrong's thoughts powerfully reinforced the ideas inspired by this poem.

Dr. Miller closed his article by saying:

As mankind strives to balance food and people, to provide dignity for each individual and to establish a rule of law with justice for all, we should remember to look at the stars and into the heart of a rose, and let a sense

of wonder grow in us as we think of The Supreme Architect. We can let our minds expand with the thought and with the words, "How Great Thou Art!"

Alvin Wilhelm Greene McNish accomplished many important things in his life, but he considered this poem to be his best work.