

a slow and sudden God

40 years of wonder

Chris Maxwell

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Poetry is not my strong suit. Prose is more my style. But Chris Maxwell's book of poems is stimulating and thought-provoking. Take "slow God" for instance.

after the waiting-on-this-forever-season surprisingly ended.
a slow and sudden God, i consider we can call Him.

Chris gets it and communicates it. God moves at His pace in His timing for our good. While we wait, God seems slow, "working leisurely," "acting sluggishly." But when the time is right, "many actions seem to happen all at once." Some people are pie-in-sky all the time, faking it I assume. I prefer real. And Chris is real. He tells it like it is. Waiting on God is no fun. It's challenging. Takes "way too long." But God always shows up. He fulfills His promises. Slowly. Yes. And suddenly with just what I need when I need it.

for us, or at least for me, that is good.
that is very good.

For me, too. Thanks, Chris, for these poems, comforting yet challenging, deep and simple, and very good!

—Ron White, EdD
president, Emmanuel College

Many people write. Not many write in living color. Thank you, Chris for leaving out no colors, for not shying away from the grays, muddled browns, and even the black tones of this life, yet somehow allowing the ink in your pen to be transformed, sometimes mid-line, into colors of hope, light and resolve because that's what God does with our pens, if we allow Him to.

—Michele Pillar
three time Grammy Award nominated singer,
speaker and author of: *Untangled, The Truth Will Set You Free.*

Chris Maxwell's words have guided me for quite some time. He blends his words beautifully. They paint pictures and unlock imagination. He never uses words to forcefully direct or bully you; his words are the kind of words that breath life and gracefully usher in a new thought or feeling. Even before this latest project, I have always thought of Chris as a poet; a poet of the Davidic type, who's words are raw and untamed, but in them you find your way home. His words have done that for me on many occasions.

Our world needs poets now more than ever. Our sound-bite culture is desperate for a new rhythm—and Chris provides it. This is a book to take your time with, and if you do, you will find these words slipping past your mind and renewing your heart.

—Charlie Dawes
Lead Pastor of Metro Church
Author of *Simple Prayer: Learning to Speak to God with Ease*

The poems in Chris Maxwell's *a slow and sudden God: 40 years of wonder* have the honesty, passion, and insight of David's psalms. Proceeding from decades of ministry and out of years of struggle with epilepsy, Chris's poems combine literariness with accessibility, imagination with gut-level reality, and insights into the contemporary world with poetic responses to, and rewritings of, Biblical texts. His poems are written to draw people to God at the very points of their struggles, and they can be appreciated by anyone from teens to the elderly and everyone in between. If you don't usually read poetry, you will easily relate to Chris's accessible poetry. If you have read poetry for years, you'll appreciate Chris's imagery, originality, and imagination. Chris is a new voice in Christian letters, but his is a voice speaking to everyone.

—Dr. James Rovira
multigenre/multimodal freelance writer, scholar, and poet

Poetry is a way of seeing and processing the world. It sharpens focus and makes one see more clearly in order to record concisely. The sparseness of poetry reveals the depth of struggle and the height of joy, not to mention the discovery of one's reaction to life's circumstances.

In a day of excess verbiage, who would have thought Twitter, with its original limit of 140 characters, could have achieved success. With its demand of making one say more in less words, Twitter's expectation of conciseness caused people to pause, reflect, and think again about what they were trying to communicate.

Chris, in psalm-like quality, has used his poetry to examine his trials, ask his questions, express his frustration, and pour out his praise as a means of processing his trials, which could have ended in defeat . . . but didn't.

—Curt Dalaba
secretary-treasurer,
Michigan District of the Assemblies of God

Reading poetry requires levels of mental attention and heart openness that transcends the usual reading of prose. Like reading the best of Hebrew poetry in the Psalms, Chris Maxwell allows us to join him as he encounters life, love, and God. These contemporary psalms open doors to a world of questions, hopes, dreams, disappointments. They invite us to sit at table with a man moving through life at the speed of hope. Take your time as you read. Ponder. Pause. Pray. Participate.

—Dr. A.D. Beacham, Jr.
general superintendent,
International Pentecostal Holiness Church

When God formed Chris Maxwell, He surely needed a willing vessel in whom to deposit an abundance of gifts, communication not being the least of them. His skill as a master wordsmith shines through in all of his writing, but especially so in this unique collection of free verse. His transparency regarding life issues gives him an instant connection with readers of all ages. Thank you, Chris, for letting us share your joys and struggles.

—Shirley G. Spencer

I have read all Chris's books over the years. But, this one is different. While he still has the capacity to write powerful sentences, paragraphs, and chapters, Chris's poetry caught me off guard. Something about the poetic license, halting abruptness to punctuate a point, fluid lyrical phrases, and playful nature of poetry amplifies and enlarges the power of his thoughts turned into words. I felt like he understood me and knew about my life struggles as he reflects deeply from his own. This is Chris Maxwell at his best! Chris's words bridge the common with the profound. He has the unique ability to turn a phrase, change a letter, or shift an emphasis in such a manner that it feels like someone turned on the lights, and my emotions, feelings, and shared experiences acquired a voice. And his voice resonates with my experience in such a way that you can almost feel the tension between light and dark, sweet and bitter, sin and redemption. I love Chris's books, but this one is my favorite.

—C. Tracy Reynolds
vice-president for student development
dean, School of Christian Ministries
Emmanuel College

Chris Maxwell loves words. He turns to words to make sense of his life's pain and to search for a compassionate, amazing God. The pairing of hard times and radiant hope means he makes much of the word yet. As in this early poem:

i am needy and alone,
yet, i am complete and never forsaken.

What a remarkable and eloquent capturing of our human condition and Christ's provision.

Later, acknowledging the infirmity of illness and weight of uncertainty, he pivots once again: "yet, i will sing through the pain." And sing Chris does, with lines that ring with all kinds of possibilities for we who are privileged to read Chris's words.

—Timothy Jones
dean of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
and author of *The Art of Prayer* and *Awake My Soul*

Chris Maxwell is a wordsmith, or better yet, a word magician. He understands the latent power of words, and is adept at arranging them in contrasts and complements so as to release their hidden potency. His word-spells radiate shafts of beauty and grace that illuminate the drabness of everyday life. These poetic incantations do not induce drowsiness, but rather awaken us to the glory that suffuses every day that the Lord has made.

—Russell Board
regional director for Continental Asia,
IPHC World Missions Ministries

When I read poetry from Chris Maxwell, he reminds me what a precious, miraculous, and powerful thing are words, and what a gift is life. Chris, too, is a gift.

—Craig Brian Larson,
pastor and author of the Kindle eBook
Hang in There to the Better End

I first met Chris Maxwell through my book, *Sacred Pauses*, and his book, *Pause: The Secret to a Better Life One Word at a Time*. Along with the common ground of our two books, I became inspired by his personal story—how he met a devastating health diagnosis with faith and honest struggle, and continued to persevere in the midst of challenge. His life and work are a testimony to God’s grace.

Chris writes with clarity and from the heart. His prose has always seemed like poetry to me, and I’m glad that his poetic voice comes to the forefront in this new collection. I love the wide embrace of the title, *a slow and sudden God*, and for the way his poems make room for words that “fit” and words that “fall apart,” for questions of call and response, for thinking and feeling, and the wide expanse of human experience. His poetry is both personal reflection and deeply theological—for heart, soul, and mind. Thank you, Chris, for sharing your poems and your life.

—April Yamasaki
pastor and author of
Sacred Pauses: Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal,
Upside-Down Living: Sharing Faith Stories,
Four Gifts: Seeking Self-Care for Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength,
and other books on Christian living

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ISBN: 978-1-948794-20-6 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-948794-21-3 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018951079

Printed in the United States of America.

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** This book is dedicated to Nathan Dana Taylor*

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acknowledgments

Breakfast. I'm imagining breakfast.

The aroma of scrambled eggs, coffee for you and juice for me, and strawberry jelly for my lightly toasted wheat toast.

The noise of conversations of generations. Family members who love words spoken, written. Words into music to be played and sang. Stories to be told. Laughter to be enjoyed. Time to be valued.

Time with food and words. Time together.

Who is there in this imagined kitchen as the fan whirls and the birds sing outside the open windows? A few of the many I need to thank. I imagine this time of grinning at them as I say thank you.

A thank you to Nathan Dana Taylor, my great grandfather who was a poet and a musician. I'm grateful I spent my first few years knowing him. Papa Taylor wrote:

*Think on These Things*¹

Phil. 4:8

*As we read the words of scripture,
See the pleasant word it brings
'Whatsoever things are lovely'
We should look upon these things . . .*

*Lovely scenes are all about us,
God has made our world this way,
Now He tells us to behold them,
Think upon them day by day.*

*Gorgeous colors, gold and purple
Slowly fading in the west,
Passing Splendor of the sunset,
Nature—lying down to rest.*

1 Nathan Dana Taylor, *Sunset and Morning* (New York: Pageant Press, Inc., 1959) 28–29.

A thank you to Carolyn Acker Maxwell, my mother who told amazing stories and wrote kind words. I'm thankful I spent my first nineteen years knowing her. I found this poem as I was going through Mama's writing. She may have written it (we couldn't find an author), but if she didn't write the poem, she thought it important enough to write it in her journal. It represents the kind and loving person she was.

Words

*They are such tiny little things
The words we say each day.
And yet they make for someone
The world seem dull or gay.*

*The little words of gossip
That we unthinking said
Left someone hurt and wounded
With hope all crushed and dead.*

*The little word of kindness,
Made all the world a song,
And someone found the journey
Less weary and less long.*

*So as we go along our way,
What'er the way may be,
Let's speak a word of love and cheer
To everyone we see.*

A thank you to my father and sisters, to all my relatives and friends. A thank you to poets and artists and storytellers. A thank you to those who've welcomed my style and encouraged me to continue writing. A thank you to high school and college English professors—Phyllis Synan and Joyce Taylor—who read my writing and challenged me to continue. A thank you to all who accepted

me and my damaged brain—your willingness to enjoy breakfast with me has been fitting and needed therapy. A thank you to James Rovira, Paul W. Smith, and Steve Spillman—our conversations and your changes in this book helped make the meal a better breakfast for all.

A thank you to the Poet who knows all about me, and still sits beside me at this life meal—in the beginning was the Word.

A thank you to my wife Debbie, who has traveled with me through so many of these poetic decades.

A thank you to our sons—Taylor, Aaron, Graham—and their wives and children. Each of them bring poetic rhythm to our lives, even from a distance.

Since we included some poetic thoughts from generations before us, let's add conversations from the younger ones in our breakfast together.

Taylor Maxwell, our oldest son, wrote:

*Brilliant Stranger*²

*you're a stranger that's watching over me
when the wind blows fill my sails and set me free
give me vision, something out there i can see
something brilliant. endless skies and hopeful dreams . . .*

*i've been waiting for my chance to brave the sea
are you watching as the storms fall over me
i'm believing. through the waves the restless seas
you are brilliant. fill my sails and set me free*

*those eyes those brilliant eyes
i know they're always watching (me)*

And seven-year-old Anthem Maxwell, our oldest grandchild, wrote:

2 Taylor Maxwell, *Father [& Mother]*, LaunchPad Studios, Inc. 700261335537, 2011, compact disk.

Japan

*Close to the river,
raining hard,
the sun is rising
over the town.*

Thanks to each of you for coming to breakfast. Imagining all of us together causes me to smile. Knowing my book of poetic confessions includes influence from generations that arrived in the kitchen before me and generations that arrived for breakfast after me, I am humbled and grateful. And I remember again, this time matters.

—Chris Maxwell

introduction: forty years

i barely recall turning forty. when reminded, the events' images appear in my mind, merging a variety of stories and faces, scenes and feelings.

now i'm nearing two decades past forty. memories amalgamate days and weeks, years and decades; pictures redirect me to reality. so do stories. so do poems. these poems. poems of various lengths and styles captured into a collection of one. like a radio station playing various styles for a mixture of genres—rock and country, classical and folk, old and new—these poems portray many moods through my twenties, thirties, forties, fifties.

the number forty, i'm told, biblically symbolizes a period of testing. a trial, a season of waiting, a mystery, a wondering about what is next. mentioned 146 times in Scripture, i'm told, the meaning could, i'm sure, vary. moses isn't here today for an interview, but i'd love to ask his take on forty years in egypt and forty years in the desert—being selected as a rescuer to bring a nation from slavery. to ask spies for details about their glancing for forty days—was the land accessible? to ask jonah about warning nineveh for forty days about potential destruction. or ezeziel being laid on his right side for forty days to symbolize judah's sins. to ask elijah about forty days without food or water at mount horeb. to ask Jesus how He felt and what He thought as He was tempted by the devil during the forty days and nights He fasted as His ministry was about to begin. to ask the followers of Jesus about His noticeable presence for forty days after His resurrection.

the number forty, for me, reveals survival in the quest of life while displaying passion and pain during that endeavor. like most forty day or forty year adventures, and like you, i've known pain. and uncertainty. and love. i've shown that pain and uncertainty and love in verses almost too free at times, and almost too tight at other times, as typing in some strange rhythm served as my rescue

and recovery during my realization that all isn't simple in this exploration of life and death and scars and more scars.

scars? forty years of scars?

prayers? forty years of prayers?

confessions? forty years of confessions?

joy? forty years of joy?

yes and yes and yes and yes. and now, this year, this time in my life, we mix these ingredients together in one platter. or, to be specific, we've collected poems and published them. and here they are.

the number forty, for you, might fit the oddity from one of the biblical history lessons. it might fit my own long ride through these streets of sharp turns, steep hills, tiny lanes—these highways under construction requiring me to gallop down roads i never prepared for, never previously traveled on, never yearned to experience. your forty years or forty days might fit a portion of a poem here or a line of a poem there—just because life, like poetry, doesn't follow the design of prose. life is, to me, a poem. a very long and very daunting and very charming poem. life reveals images to us; we feel them. life takes turns, much later letting us finally—and slightly—understand what we previously thought we surely understood. life rhymes at times, then seems to tie nothing together. life is brief and long. life is laughter and tears. life is a surgical procedure. life is waiting and waiting and waiting then noticing the something we waited for occurred unexpectedly right beside us while we stared out the window hoping to glance it from a distance. life thrills us. life scares us.

the number forty, for me, doesn't represent the number on a jersey of a famous athlete or the number of a street or even the years. it carries those parts, but as a whole, at least to me, the number symbolizes grace. to the moose and the jonah in us. to the ezekeiel

and the elijah in us. from the Jesus in us. wildernesses, deserts,
spies, warnings, temptations, days, years. stories poetically revealing
ages. poems conversationally intruding normality.

me? i wrote, and write, to survive. i wrote my own method of
poetry before and after my brain battled its war as i neared my own
forty. and though more words hide now, i'm still writing to survive.

you? thanks for taking a little time in your own wildernesses,
deserts, spies, warnings, temptations, days, and years to open your
eyes and open your mind and open your heart to taste the stories.
i hope you'll love some of the poems. i hope you'll find a place in
many of them where your own forty days find a place, where your
own forty questions or forty words or forty prayers find a place.

it is, i guess, a matter of time.

my time. your time. this time.

of forty years or forty days or forty words or forty letters.

time, which i've learned through these decades really matters.

so, in the poem of your own life, notice now as one tiny giant that
matters greatly in this rapid lane of time.

reflections

i live with severe brain damage. some of these poems were written during my recovery from encephalitis, some were written as i've learned to endure this life of epilepsy and short term memory struggles, and some were written as i reflected on other life issues. writing was one of the best medicines i could have taken.



poetry and words

i'm thankful today for poetry.

the imagery. the rhythm. the sounds. the lines.
reading it, today.
hearing it, now.
daring my damaged brain
to envision, to visualize, to notice,
and then to craft words.
luring my loving heart toward care again.
today. this morning. now.

words open readers' minds to think and feel and wonder.
windows open.
doors open.
moods change, suddenly or slowly.
bright lights begin to dim.
they quickly shine again, then fade.

walking into rooms then out.
running into fields then through.
investigating with and without.
noticing the old and the new.
words which have aged
gracefully, peacefully, appealingly.
words which are waking to life
for the first time, for this time, for now.

this now.
today's morning.
an only time as a reality of itself
but also as a pleasure for repetition.
more moments. more nows. more todays. more mornings
of poetic motion, of pieces and portions, imagery and rhythm.
curving lines through hills and streams.

hearing feet tapping as precision with resolve, with tenacity.
hearing water flowing as a lover racing home.

words. fit. together.

words. fall. apart.

not controlled. not controlling.
it's about noticing.
noticing now, the same.
noticing again, differently.
and again, and differently again.

space covered with these friends of mine.
near me, they stay.
then they hide.
i find them, maybe.
but the process
of sliding downhill on a windy day like today
is fitting.
words are the wind.
words are the weather.
words are the ground.
words are the rain.
words are the heat.
words are the cold.

let us not miss them.
let us not ignore them.
they rhyme at their own times.
they reveal their rhythm in their own ways.
they capture us, as pace and flow and image
dare again our damaged brains and broken hearts to notice.

reality

words spoken or written, intentionally or unintentionally, and released.
words heard or read, passively or aggressively, and received.
words captured, carried, cast away.
words caught, canned, kept in place.

words for now. words for then.
words for us. words for them.

influential, compassionate, aware.
contemplative, aggressive, unsure.

words, describing and defining,
revealing images into many minds,
releasing experiences into many hearts.

welcome words.
learn from, love with, live in words.
speak them when needed.
think and rethink them correctly.
edit them mentally before releasing.

let them heal rather than hurt.
let them gently open doors
rather than slamming shut.
work a craft of respect, humility,
courage, hope, dreams, care,
compassion, and positive influence
through words.

a world is being changed by them.
we are part of that transformation.
i pray our words offer health
rather than harm.
i pray our words alter the

course of damage
and turn toward recovery.

deep care. kind words.
positive change.