

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

Tracing Willa Cather's Nebraska Red Cloud Preserves Her Memory — By A. L. Rowse

Few Americans seem to realize what a treasure they have in Red Cloud, a veritable little *ville musée*. How many people know where it is, or have ever been there?

And yet, as Mildred R. Bennett tells us in her excellent book, *The World of Willa Cather*: "Red Cloud, Nebraska, has probably been described more often in literature than any other village its size." I think we should say "small town" rather. The marvelous thing about it is that it has preserved itself utterly unspoiled, hardly changed since the early days of about 100 years ago. For that we must be grateful to the public spirit, the local pride of its townspeople in their great writer — and, yes, to their artistic conscience, in a world that sees all too much destruction going on around us.

Here is a place with the charm unbroken, the spell still upon it that first drew me to it more than 20 years ago. Several people have asked me, slightly puzzled, why I am so keen on Nebraska; and I remember even Johnny Carson at Burbank being taken aback by an Englishman knowing who a "cornhusker" is. (He was one himself — and anyway I love these relics of old American folklore in almost tribal names, a Georgia "nutcracker," North Carolina "tarheel," Indiana "whosier," if that is how it is spelt.)

Red Cloud appears, under different names, in several of Willa Cather's novels — in *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *Lucy Gayheart* and *The Song of the Lark* — and in various short stories. It should not need saying that she was one of the finest of American writers, and that most of her books are to be regarded as classics. But it does

need saying that, in my view, Willa Cather gives a truer picture of Americans and American life than all the muckrakers of modern fiction. A picture of the true-hearted, old and rooted country life of America — where you can still leave your house door unlocked and rely on your neighbors. This is the America the outside world knows little of — and would have a better appreciation and understanding of, if it did: for one thing the sheer generosity of American life, and the decency you wouldn't suspect from the sensation-mongers and many best-sellers, and even intellectuals, today.

Willa Cather was an intellectual herself, with the highest standards; but she knew the raw facts of life as well as any. Her books have poetic sentiment, but no sentimentality; there is even a vein of iron beneath the poetry. She knew the harshness and hardness of pioneering life on the unlicked prairie, the poverty and almost unbearable strain; but also the bravery and stoicism in that first generation of pioneers who lived in the hutments — the shelters they constructed out of the sod — as the first menfolk of her family there did.

Red Cloud is named for an Indian chief in what was Pawnee country. It began as a pioneering settle-

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Humorous Criticism of Cather's Work By Marilyn Arnold

Most students and scholars who follow current critical commentary on the work of Willa Cather are familiar with James Work's tongue-in-cheek approach to *The Professor's House* published in the Winter of 1984 issue of *Western American Literature*. They might not know, however, that at least two other writers, both contemporaries of Cather, also employed humor in arguing their positions. While Work satirizes Cather's predisposition toward allusion and symbolism, and at the same time presents a spoof on academic writing in general, his predecessors are less sophisticated and more broadly humorous and folksy in their approaches.

Work's article, nevertheless, covers a broad spectrum of humor, from the clever to the downright corny. The latter is apparent, for example, when Work discusses Cather's symbolic use of color,

particularly purple. Although Work feels that Cather overuses purple, he grants that she is not the only western writer to do so, and he cites such western titles as "Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Manfred's *Purple Riders of Judgment*, Frank Norris' *The Octopus*, and Waters' *Purple of the Valley*" to illustrate his point. He adds, "I hardly need mention *The Grapes of Wrath*." Work chides Cather mercilessly for her careless and excessive use of allusion, but he is best when he concludes his article with two trumped up, wonderfully abstruse "quotations" and attributes them to two of his colleagues. The footnote for the first bit of undecipherable academese reports that the quotation is from an article by Richard Etulain titled "Why John Milton Never Published Our Conversations." (Milton has published a number of "Conversa-

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ment alongside the Republican River, about 120 miles southwest from Lincoln, capital of the state, right down on the border with Kansas. The border here is made by the Great Divide one looks up to from the little town, between the streams on their way to the River Platte, famous route of the Oregon Trail.

Willa Cather's work always had a devoted following in England, though her cultural sympathies were markedly French. (These inspired her historical novel about Quebec, *Shadows on the Rock*.) So when an invitation came my way to lecture at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, I accepted with alacrity, with the hope of getting to Red Cloud. I mean no disrespect to Lincoln, which is a well-designed, well-laid-out capital city — it is wonderful what the two generations since Willa's early years at the university there have accomplished on the bare prairie, parks and waters, avenues of trees planted and grown up.

But Red Cloud was my mecca — nearly a quarter of a century ago, on my first visit — and I was not disappointed. I saw it all in the light of that writer's imagination, the spell this girl of genius who had grown up there laid upon it — just as Thomas Hardy laid his spell upon Dorchester, or Nathaniel Hawthorne upon Salem.

I stood on the Indian mound above the Republican River, and looked across where formerly a house stood isolated among its trees, rather grander than the usual, which used to excite Willa's curiosity as a girl and ultimately was the inspiration for the home of Captain Forrester and his wife in *A Lost Lady*, one of her most perfect works, a novella. Most of her books, by the way, are not long: they are beautifully proportioned, unlike the ungainly, 1,000-page-long best sellers of today, unmanageable to read.

Alas, the house of *A Lost Lady*, a bigish frame house with its own drive to it, one of the spots marked out by Willa's genius, was destroyed by fire in 1925. I missed it sorely; with my passion for seeing places that have been written

about, that are alive in literature, brought alive by genius, I should love to have penetrated it, savored its atmosphere.

In those days one could not enter what had been the Cather home from 1884 to 1904. It was still a private house, visitors not welcome. It was, and is, a pretty house on the corner of Third and Cedar Streets; I viewed it hopefully in vain, recalling its memories a little sadly. Willa herself describes it in an early novel, *The Song of the Lark*: "They turned into another street and saw before them lighted windows, a low story-and-a-half house, with a wing built on at the right and a kitchen addition at the back, everything a little on the slant — roofs, windows, and doors." And somewhere in a story she describes how the snow would sift in between the chinks of the roof of her attic bedroom in those long Nebraska winters.

Frustrated as I was on my first visit, I was yet lucky in meeting Mildred R. Bennett, the woman who has made it her life's mission to transform all this and to preserve Red Cloud as the *ville musée* it is. I will confess that I then did not believe that it was possible to achieve what she has subsequently accomplished. Wait till I tell you what her devotion and drive, her scholarship and imagination, have brought about. All she could show me those years ago were a few stray objects and trinkets of Willa Cather's which she had collected, and one could not even enter the Cather home. Those household articles were the beginning of a museum, and today it is housed in the old home, furnished as it was in Willa's girlhood days a century ago.

On subsequent visits to Lincoln I made the acquaintance of Willa's youngest sister, Elsie, who showed me many of the family treasures, portraits, albums of photographs, china, the tea service we drank tea out of. (She gave me my copy of *A Lost Lady*.) Much of all this had now come to Red Cloud, and the Cather home looks today as Willa knew it: the family furniture in the front parlor, dining room and

kitchen — where their maid-servant lived, whom they brought with them from Virginia.

For we must remember that Willa was Virginia-born, of good old stock that had been in Virginia for five or six generations. She came to Nebraska with the family at the age of 9: it was those impressionable years of growing up that entered into the lifeblood of her imagination. Only one of her novels, her last, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), is about Virginia.

All her life she was in love with Nebraska, and today we can see the house and home, the unchanged townscape and unspoiled countryside, where her dreams took shape and have become an abiding bequest of the grown woman to our literature.

Her little attic bedroom, where she dreamed her dreams — to be so richly fulfilled — still has the wallpaper of small red and brown roses she put up. And the veranda is where she read and read, pulling the shade to, for she always had an instinct for privacy, would never allow her books to be filmed, and had all her letters destroyed. Another contrast with writers today, too much of whose private affairs are washed in public. It was the Duke of Wellington who complained that he had been "much exposed to authors;" well, Willa wasn't one for exposing her personal life.

All the same, for myself I should like to see her novels and stories on television or film, or on the stage, now that I expect the time limit has expired.

The coming of the Burlington Railroad was the making of Red Cloud, and on the southern edge of the town is the 1897 depot, delicately restored on the other side of the line, a little mecca in itself for railroad buffs. Though I am not expert enough to be one of them, I love the romantic names of the old railroads, the Chesapeake & Ohio, the Lackawanna, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe.

Everything is as it should be in that delicious little depot, just the kind of station that would have been familiar to Abraham Lincoln: the signals and timetables, the tic-

ket office and benches, even the oil lamps. The Burlington Railroad put Red Cloud on the map, and it plays a great part in Cather's books as in her life.

A Lost Lady begins with the railroad. "In those days it was enough to say of a man that he was 'connected with the Burlington.' There were the directors, the general managers, vice presidents, superintendents, whose names we all knew; and their younger brothers or nephews were auditors, freight agents, departmental assistants. Everyone connected with the Road, even the large cattle- and grain-shippers, had annual passes; they and their families rode about over the line a great deal."

And so did Willa herself. Her brother Douglass worked on the railroad in Colorado. Willa several times visited him out there — unmarried, like herself, he was her favorite. And thus there came about the most popular of her books, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* — about the missionary Bishop Lamy of Santa Fe — which became a best seller in Britain as well as in the United States.

Come with me back to the center of the town, where memories and associations are thickest. Pivot of the place is the very vertical, highly decorative red brick and sandstone Willa Cather Historical Center. This was the former Farmers' and Merchants' Bank Building, erected in 1889 by Governor Garber, prototype of Captain Forrester in *A Lost Lady*. He had rather grand ideas (and I think overspent himself); certainly the most, or the only, grandiose building in the town — though one dares hardly to venture a word against Victorian architecture nowadays.

Inside I recall a touch of Art Nouveau in the tessellated pavement — which reminded me of Mark Twain's very grand Art Nouveau house at Hartford, Connecticut. More important are the collections within — the library, first editions, books, portraits, photographs of things and people as they were.

But what is wonderful about Red Cloud is how little changed it is: some Guardian Angel — in the

shape of Mildred Bennett and her faithful flock — have stood on guard against the Devil of Destruction.

Stand on the front steps, look around and see for yourself. Across the street is the State Bank building of 1883, the year the Cather family arrived from Virginia — one of the first brick buildings in the town and made of native brick. Among the things I specially noticed were the pretty decorative brick cornices those early buildings have just under the eaves.

Next to this on the north is the Opera House built two years later, exactly a century ago, where William Jennings Bryan spoke at the height of his fame and oratory. The gist of his message was put more succinctly by a lady than by himself: "Raise less corn, and more hell!" In this building Willa graduated from high school in 1890. Actually she wrote the most perceptive account of Bryan ever written, for on top of everything else she was a brilliant journalist.

You will find it in the excellent anthology of Nebraska writing, published by the discriminating university press there: *Roundup: A Nebraska Reader*, edited by Virginia Faulkner.

All around in this old heart of the town are still the houses of the people she knew, still inhabited for me by her characters of them in her books, just as they were in life. At the back of the Royal Hotel is the site of the Boys' Home Hotel, since demolished, of *My Antonia* — Willa's own favorite, as was the original of Antonia, the spirited Czech girl with whom Willa was more than half in love. (She always thought of herself as a boy — and, for a writer, had the advantage of ambivalence, a double sensibility.)

In Franklin Street was the earlier brothel — the House of the Soiled Doves, built by Fannie Fernleigh, prototype of Nell Emerald in *A Lost Lady*. Willa certainly knew the facts of life all right, and from both sides, without making a song and dance about them. I suppose if she were writing today she might be a bit more outspoken about her tastes.

Turning down Seward Street is the little Catholic church in which Antonia was married; on the south side the Baptist church — now the Church of Christ — the Cather family attended. At the corner of Cedar and Sixth is the Episcopal church Willa joined in 1922, after her full career in Pittsburgh and New York. She had noticed as a girl how children longed for color in the blank church windows; here she put up stained glass windows in memory of her parents — the Good Shepherd for her father, for she remembered how in Virginia he kept sheep.

The country around Red Cloud speaks no less eloquently of Willa and the Cathers, though one hasn't space to do it justice. Nineteenth-century America, perhaps the most creative period of the United States is brought home to one by the little churches of the different religious sects, many of them immigrants; and no less by the small country schools, to which the people owed so much. So many of those early primary school teachers were so dedicated to their work — several of the family were teachers, my friend Elsie Cather all her life.

Up toward the Divide is the big frame house of Uncle George, a wealthier member of the family; it appears in *One of Ours*. When I was there it was standing empty, fast going derelict, echoing and ghostly in its isolated position, trees growing round the draw by its side, the tulips someone had planted still growing for nobody at all.

Not far is the Catherton cemetery, the first grave that of Aunt Alyerna (Aunt Vernie), who died a young woman of 33 on December 30, 1883, that first hard winter when they had to break the ground with an ax — as for Shimerda's funeral in *My Antonia*. But in Maytime all in Nebraska is beautiful: a gentle breeze in the cedars planted around the little wayside graveyard, open furrows beyond, meadowlarks singing sweet over the vast fields. I could wish that Willa were buried among her people here. But never mind, her memory is all around.

And every Maytime people from all over the United States make their pilgrimage to Red Cloud — brought together by the devotion and organizing energy of Mildred Bennett and her helpers, among them Prof. Robert Knoll of the University of Nebraska, the faithful townspeople, properly supported by the capital of the state to which Willa brought worldwide fame.

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GRANT AWARDED TO CURATOR

A \$2,975 grant from the American Association for State and Local History has been awarded to Ann E. Billesbach, Curator of the Willa Cather Historical Center. The grant will support her study of some 45 literary biographical museums. She will assess how they interpret the sense of region or locality found in an author's writings. The project will result in recommendations on ways in which biographical museums can improve and broaden their interpretive programs. Billesbach is one of only 18 recipients nationwide to receive a grant through the AASLH program.

DO YOU HAVE YOUR COPY?

The following periodicals are still available from the Cather Foundation Book Store:

- Western American Literature, February, 1984; Three Articles on *The Professor's House*.
- Western American Literature, May, 1982; "A Willa Cather Issue."
- Great Plains Quarterly, Fall, 1984; 1983 Seminar.
- Great Plains Quarterly, Fall, 1982; 1981 Seminar.

The WAL Journals are \$5.00 each; the Quarterlies are \$4.00 each. Add \$1.50 for postage and handling for one or two publications or \$2.25 for three or all four.

HUMOROUS CRITICISM

(Continued from Page 5)

tions With" western writers.) The article is said to appear in volume 14 of the *Journal of the Smooth Wire Collector's Society*, 31 February 1951, and to have run well over a hundred pages. The second "quotation" is documented as an article by Max Westbrook titled "Falling Archetypes" that appeared in a journal called *Orthopedagogic Quarterly*.

Work obviously enjoys presenting his corrective spoof at Cather's expense. What surprises the reader is not that Work would attack *The Professor's House*, but that he would write a comically serious article (read first as a paper at a Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association Conference) and submit it to a non-comically serious journal, and that said journal would publish it. In Cather's lifetime the media seemed more disposed than today's media to publish unsophisticated humorous criticism, and public taste seemed more disposed to accept it.

The earlier of the two contemporary pieces, titled "One of Hers: Long After," is a parody of *One of Ours*. Written by Christopher Ward, it first appeared 3 February 1923, p. 435, in the *Literary Review* of the *New York Evening Post*, and was reprinted in Ward's *The Triumph of the Nut and Other Parodies* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1923, pp. 94-104). It pretends to be a reprint of two chapters, the first and last, of a book called *The Young Hamlet of the Prairies*. The hero, Claude Wheeler, is afflicted with the same restlessness, inertia, and despair that afflict Cather's Claude, and his circumstances are similar to those of her character. Ward, however, assigns his hero's discontentment to a different cause. The Claude of *The Young Hamlet* is troubled only over his shirt. It is "the same shirt which he had worn yesterday, would wear tomorrow. But it was not the monotony of the shirt that deluged him with self-pity. It was the fact that he had only one collar-button." This distresses Claude, for "other people, the Erlich boys in Lincoln, his own father, had two.

Claude had but one, which fastened his shirt in front. When he wore a collar he had to fasten it at the back with an old piece of string, which Mahailey had given him."

Ward dramatizes Claude's trauma of the collar button, stating with mock seriousness, "Claude would have liked to buy another collar-button. He had more than enough money, and his father was a rich farmer. He tried to excuse his cowardice to himself, but in his heart he knew that it was too difficult for him to do this simple thing." Claude's mother also worries about the fact that her son is short a collar-button, and she offers him a "piece of an old can opener" as a substitute. He tells her he will use a shingle nail, and urges her not to worry.

Ward does not stop with collar buttons, however. In his version of Cather's story, Nat Wheeler chops down the second story staircase (instead of the cherry tree) for a joke, stranding Claude's mother whose modesty prevents her from descending the ladder that now connects the home's two stories. Mahailey sleeps on a shelf in the cellar, and goes about with her apron over her head. When Claude wants to wash, he uses the kitchen sink because "other people had used the bathroom before him and he was very exclusive." Claude's strongest emotional attachment is to Molly, the cow, who stands about on three legs because she lost the fourth in the Civil War. The narrator sums up Claude's situation: "The life of a farmer was useless, vain, empty, unsatisfying, monotonous, depressing, dreary. He was a farmer and he had but one collar-button."

Ward then jumps to his "book's" final chapter, set in the war zone in France. It is comprised mainly of a telephone conversation between Cather and her hero. We hear only Claude's side of the conversation, but it is clear that Cather is urging him to mount the parapet in the face of enemy fire and he is resisting the command. She tries to tell him that his life is spoiled anyway, but he says, oh, no, it isn't; he has plans. And even if Enid does not

return to him, he is not likely to "die of grief." Claude grants that as a serious novelist Cather has to avoid happy endings, but he fails to see why he has to be one of the war's casualties when the percentages are actually in his favor. In the end, Claude outwits his creator by hoisting a dummy on the parapet to take the bullets Cather intended for him.

Perhaps the most outlandish of the three pieces mentioned here is by Joseph J. Reilly. It appears as the lead article in *The Bookman*, April 1932, under the title, "When the Japs Beleaguered Manhattan." The article is, as the title indicates, ethnically insensitive and outdated, but it has a certain degree of bald charm. In order to identify the writers whom he believes popular taste would elevate to the rank of "top five," and then to dismiss at least three of them, Reilly fabricates a seige on Manhattan by the Japanese Navy. As Reilly tells it, the invaders bottle up Manhattan and threaten to destroy it unless America's "five most highly regarded" novelists are surrendered to them, one per week for five weeks. An "Arbiter Elegantiae" is appointed to determine who the five are and in what order they are to be surrendered. As luck would have it, America's leading novelists are all in New York at the time, "attending a convention at the Algonquin Hotel." Because the dictatorial Arbiter still has "a lingering interest in the democratic tradition," he distributes ballots to subway patrons before making his choices. The five novelists who are clearly ranked at the top are Cather, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Edith Wharton, and Thornton Wilder.

With the ears of the whole country awaiting his decisions, and national intensity over the matter growing each week, the Arbiter one by one relinquishes Dreiser, Lewis, and Wilder — giving detailed catalogues of their weaknesses in justification for his letting them go first. His task grows more difficult, however, when he is left to choose between Wharton and Cather. He finally concludes that Wharton is more dispensible than Cather, for while Wharton is "the

more perfect artist," Cather is "the greater genius." When his choice is announced, some approve and some do not. The Algonquin is draped in black.

As the country awaits the Arbiter's final comments on the postponed but inevitable surrender of Cather, it receives notice that the Arbiter has snapped under the strain and taken his own life. Beside his body is a note indicating that he cannot give up Willa Cather. He urges that Manhattan be sacrificed rather than Cather surrendered, and confesses to have secretly offered such a deal to the invaders. It was refused, and he has committed "hara-kiri."

Clearly, Cather is the Arbiter's favorite, though he has high regard for Wharton too. His distaste for Dreiser's frank treatment of sex and the biological aspects of mortal experience is apparent in his use of humor as a weapon of attack. Reilly tells us that the Arbiter went into hiding after giving Dreiser to the enemy the first week. He continues, "The rumour got abroad that the Association of Contaminated Bell-hops had issued a protest against the surrender of Mr. Dreiser, but it went unconfirmed. Meanwhile the city's only newspaper, *The Limit* (the offspring of several mergers and celebrated for its slogan 'No news that's fit to print'), went unread into the Arbiter's waste basket." We learn further that when the Arbiter surrendered the three male novelists first, he was accused of letting his "chivalry" dull his "critical judgment." We also learn, however, that he was "absolved in a set of spirited resolutions adopted by the Federated Women's Clubs of the beleaguered island."

These two pieces of little known criticism are enjoyable to read because of their humor, but they also give strong indication of Cather's reputation in her lifetime. Generally, only works that are very well known can be parodied successfully, hence Ward's parody of *One of Ours* is also something of a tribute to Cather. Further, Reilly suggests that although there was some disagreement (mainly among fellow novelists) with the Arbiter's decision to keep Cather for the

very last, there seems to have been no argument about her selection as one of the top five writers of her time.

Marilyn Arnold, Dean of Graduate Studies at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, found these data when she researched her forthcoming book which deals with critical articles on Cather. This exciting volume should be off the press by the end of summer. Watch for further announcements.

NEWS FROM VIRGINIA CATHER'S BIRTHPLACE

Charter Board member, Jennie Reiher has received the following news from her cousin, The Reverend Morris Cather of Winchester, Virginia.

"There's a fresh coat of paint on Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather's Gore birthplace, and the inside is being fixed up too.

"The historic site is now the home of Mary Baughman. Miss Baughman said she learned about some of the things that needed correcting the hard way — last winter she found snow had melted in the yard and run into her kitchen. She had to scoop out 20 gallons of water.

"She also would like to renovate the woodshed and a separate building that once was used for housing the help and cooking.

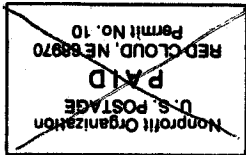
"The historic marker out front sometimes draws in visitors and Miss Baughman, a former Frederick County teacher, said she has shown some around, including the president of the University of Connecticut."

LETTERS

... upon receiving the photos of Cather from *Architectural Digest*.

From Lo Chi Chang of Shanghai, Peoples Republic of China:

"How happy I was to receive the pictures of Willa Cather's house. How I like the unassuming, clean, but simple house. The rooms are



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AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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tidy and cozy. There is no expensive furniture. They are not polluted by cheap and vain decorations. They are just like herself and the essence of her novels like *The Song of the Lark* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. From these pictures I understand the background of her novels more than ever."

WILLOW SHADE

Reverend Cather also writes:

"Some great news — the State Historical marker for Willow Shade has been approved, has been or-

dered and will be installed in the near future. As I told you the Cather Reunion is paying for the marker.

The text will read: "This house, built in 1858, was the childhood home of novelist Willa Cather from 1874 to 1883 when she moved with her family to Nebraska. It was the setting of the final chapters of her novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Willa Cather was born December 7, 1873, one mile south in the community of Gore, then known as Back Creek Valley."

ANTONIA'S GARDEN

walk
past "two silvery moth-like trees"
a house drowned in hollyhocks
into the apple orchard
black trunks
stained with blue grass
French pinks
children running
the new wild
seeded with the old
green Bohemian fingers
talk
caught in a cup of sun

— Robert Schuler

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